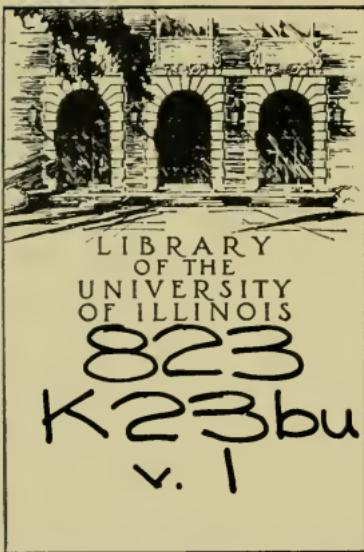




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1886

BURIED DIAMONDS

entitled

BY

SARAH TYTLER

AUTHOR OF 'SAINT MUNGO'S CITY' 'CITOYENNE JACQUELINE' ETC.



IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.

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BURIED DIAMONDS

CHAPTER I.

THE WATCHER IN THE QUARRY.

No place could be more peaceful than the old quarry just beyond the grounds of Redcot on a still, grey winter afternoon. The quarry had been abandoned by the masons who had once worked in it for at least a score of years. The men who had wielded mallet and chisel there, and caused the air to resound with the din of labour, or of rough-voiced talk and laughter at meal-time, had betaken themselves to other quarries, or had lain down to a long rest from mortal toil. Kind Nature's healing processes had gone on for so many

changing seasons that, what in the days of its full activity and value in a commercial light, had been a raw ugly scar on the side of a sandstone rock, at the edge of a hanging wood, was now mellowed by time and weather. It stood veiled and garlanded by luxuriant drapery of bramble and briar, with bushes of elder and thorn springing from odd niches, and tufts of gorse and bracken clinging for bare life to the merest crannies, until the old quarry had become a positive object of beauty in the landscape. Indeed, its attractions in this respect were sometimes fatal to its seclusion. Lovers of wild roses and of blackberries in their prime, seekers after birds' nests, hunters after certain kinds of butterflies, adventurous spirits with nothing else to do, were apt to invade the steep, broken recesses of the disused quarry, not without danger to the ignorant stranger. Tramps had been known to sleep there in passing, tinkers to squat there for a time. But that was in the height of

summer. In November, when the vegetation was sere and russet, the very bramble leaves, with their hectic dyes, shrivelling up or rotting under the sharp frost or the heavy dew, which the sun, when it did break forth, had not strength to lick up ; when the birds, except in the morning, were nearly all silent, and only the white tail of a rabbit scudding to its hole, flashed a little light on the dim cheerlessness of the scene, few persons were to be met with for weeks together near Redcot Quarry. For, as it happened, no by-road or right-of-way from village to village, no path frequented by school children, led past the place. The old road, which the masons had trodden when the quarry was in full operation, had long been as overgrown and as much left to a not ungraceful neglect as everything else.

But during the darkening days of the last autumn and winter, one man had been, unknown to his little world, a daily frequenter of the miniature precipices and

yawning holes beneath the Redcot Quarry. He came there regularly at certain hours, and lingered for long intervals at points of vantage among the scattered hillocks. He tramped up doggedly, like a man unaccustomed to be challenged ; yet there was an element of stealthiness in the tramp. He had the air of a man who had stolen away from his neighbours to indulge a craving, who did not wish to be observed in the indulgence. He was always careful in choosing a station among the rocks and underwood from which his figure could not be detected at the distance his eye could command, since the upper portion of the quarry afforded a tolerably wide view of the adjoining country, including the meadows of Ladslove as well as the woods of Redcot.

The watcher was on the spot on the afternoon referred to. He was standing quite erect but partially sheltered from notice by a projecting mass of ancient *débris*, which did not prevent him from looking steadily down across

an uninterrupted flat space below, a good many acres in extent. He stood stock still. He had not moved for the last half-hour. It seemed as if the very muscles of the face, healthily coloured and tanned by an open-air life, were frozen into rigidity.

The fields to which the gazer's attention was directed were stripped bare with the swept-out emptiness of late autumn. Some of them had been already turned up by the plough and lay in heavy dark clods of earth. Others were pasture fields, but the cattle which had fed there had been housed for the winter, and the grass had the whitey-green sodden look which it assumes under a sunless haze and unformed frost, or under wet, pure and simple. A turnip field in which sheep had been penned presented yellowing, half-cropped leaves, and rooted up gnawed bulbs, in the middle of a waste of mire, but the sheep, too, having done their duty, were gone, and only the hurdles, falling down, and with many gaps, were left to tell the tale of

the former occupants. Nothing was stirring even on the little stretch of high road which intersected the meadow-land ; no vehicle of any description ; neither pink-coat, nor horse, nor dog to suggest a meet far on in the day. No prospect could have been more blank than that which seemed to fascinate the watcher.

If he was a poacher he carried no gun. He might be a gamekeeper from his shabby shooting coat and leggings, but the ungloved hands—long, with well-shaped nails—were not those of an ordinary gamekeeper, and the soft felt hat shaded a lean lined face, which was not that of the typical yeoman. It betrayed traces of breeding and culture, running down through more than one generation. True, a king may look like a clown, but it was not so with John Prior, the squire of Redcot. He was as shabby in his outward man as squire could be. He was in the state of irritability, apprehension, and hopelessness, which is calculated to make a man careless in his dress, unless

he happens to be a martinet of the matter. He had never been handsome, though he was not without a certain air of distinction to begin with. He was tall and well made in figure, but in face his features were harsh and irregular, culminating in a heavy forehead. Yet the breadth of brow was striking, and the carriage of the head had been good. The eyes with the somewhat shaggy eyebrows were honest, intelligent eyes, which in their day could return a quick response to the more than half-suppressed smile, full of dry humour, of the large expressive mouth.

But smiles had become strange to John Prior. His hair was almost white, though he was not sixty. He was acquiring a fleshless, dried-up look which rendered his natural disadvantages—the bullet shape of his forehead, the size of his jaw—more conspicuous. A perfect net-work of wrinkles was being lodged at the corners of his eyes and right across his forehead. The lines from the wide nose to the

mouth, unshaded by moustache or beard, had become deepened and accentuated till a double prominence was given to the long upper lip. The large mouth would have been coarse but for its original humour and kindness, and for what had replaced these qualities—a tumult of pain and trouble which for the most part compressed the lips and only occasionally sent a rueful quiver through them, the result being a trifle tragic but not vulgar. Altogether, John Prior's face was rapidly becoming ugly enough to have figured in stone on a gargoyle, and aroused speculations in the much exercised nineteenth century critic as to whether it partook most of the absurd or the piteous, and what its sculptor could have meant by that grotesque, pathetic face.

Poor John Prior's personality, both moral and physical, had been wrenched and gnarled. He had started in life with a strong side and a weak side—both stronger and weaker than is the experience of the generality of his fellows—

and the weak element was, as is perhaps not uncommon, bred of the strong—part and parcel of its passionate earnestness, vehemence, unreasonableness. He had been disappointed again and again in almost everything he had put his hand to or set his heart upon—very often as much by his own fault, by the temper which had made him hope or dream without measure or balance, as by the fault of another. But that did not render the disappointment less bitter, and he was a man who took disappointment as he had taken everything else, keenly and persistently, supping upon sorrow, without any effort or capacity to change the harsh diet. At first he fed on it in silence with a proud isolation ; latterly, as both pride and strength were fretted beyond endurance, he grew surly with the surliness at times broken by such a savage growl of suffering as a gentleman—not in look and descent alone, but at the core of his heart—could permit himself.

John Prior was standing there in the dank,

gloomy November afternoon, chilled to the marrow, for his blood ran more slowly with his loss of heart. He was keeping a forlorn guard on circumstances which at the same time he knew himself powerless to control. He was anticipating fate by a kind of fascination, as he would have gone out to brave and defy it in his hot youth. He was telling himself it was well to know the best or the worst of his misfortunes at once, without the loss of an hour, and he was sensible that at any moment while he lurked there in Redcot Quarry, as if he were an evildoer, the committer of an act of which he should be everlastingly ashamed, his doom and the doom of his wife and children might descend upon him. It would not fall from the skies, but it might rise with its irresistible secret out of the insensate earth, after it had been probed and pierced.

John Prior had not been guilty of murder. No victim of brute violence or moral cupidity had been, under an extraordinary temptation

of the Devil, slain by him and hidden from sight in these low-lying, dull, innocent-looking meadows. Neither had he stolen some tempting wedge of gold and goodly Babylonish garment, and stowed them away in that obscure corner. For that matter the fields did not belong to him, and were not likely to have been selected by him as the spot where he was free to deposit his prey or his spoil, unless he entertained the base design of directing suspicion away from his guilty self to his guiltless neighbour. The meadows at John Prior's feet were part of a little farm called Ladslove, and had nothing to do with the estate of Redcot; worse luck to the squire.

CHAPTER II.

THE ADVANCE OF THE ENEMY.

ALL the same these fields contained buried treasure for John Prior, long known to him and to none else in the same degree, pondered over and reckoned on as far as it could be reckoned without actual contact. It had been the object of his ambition ever since he had succeeded his father in the Redcot acres to buy this neighbouring farm—his only method of securing the ground which held the pearl of great price. But when he could have made the purchase the farm did not come into the market. Later, when the necessity of getting the land into his own possession, or at least of keeping it out of dangerous hands, had become

a thousand times more pressing—even in common prudence, Prior was cruelly crippled in funds, and he had grown to entertain a fatal, overweening confidence in Ladslove's remaining with its original owner till a more convenient season. When this was to be, only a man of John Prior's peculiar temperament, with a warp of sanguine rashness thrown up broadly against a melancholy woof of doubt and despair, could have imagined. It was plainer and plainer, not only that the Redcot estate—in these bad days for agriculture—was of small account without its mines, but that the Redcot coal-field on its present level was nearly worked out. It had become so difficult and costly in the working that it could only be carried on at an outlay which barely paid its expenses, and left hardly a margin of profit. Side by side with the diminished gains was the unwelcome knowledge that the scale of the family living—simple enough in truth, and the income, not a great one, drawn by John Prior's only son, in place

of being reduced in proportion, must, as a matter of necessity, continue very much what they were, with a tendency rather to increase than decrease.

At last, when the squire of Redcot was well aware that the sole chance for him and his, since he had not the money to sink the Redcot pits deeper, lay in the supineness of an old-fashioned, ignorant yeoman, who cared more for the blooming surface of his fields than for the fire which might be in their breast—the security crumbled into dust. The yeoman, who held that blood was thicker than water, signed a bill for a tradesman brother-in-law. The brother-in-law broke; the bill came due; the surety could not meet it; indeed, had other bills hanging heavily round his honest bull neck. Lambert Crabtree, the principal partner and manager of Crabtree's Bank in Newton—the next market town—took the farm with the consent of the panic-stricken desperate debtor, in payment of the

bad debt to the bank, and handed over the small amount of purchase money which exceeded the banking transactions, just enough to set up the dispossessed yeoman as a coal-agent, whom Crabtree might favour by his and the bank's patronage in Newton. The farm of Ladslove, in the 'lie' of the Redcot coal-fields, according to mining statistics and traditions, in place of being John Prior's purchase, was first the property of Crabtree's Bank, and next, by some private arrangement, the personal possession of Lambert Crabtree.

But all is not lost that a friend gets, and if blood is thicker than water, it might have been a consolation to the proposed buyer who had lost his opportunity that the prize had not gone to an entire stranger, but to an old county neighbour, an acquaintance of long standing, more than that to John Prior's own son-in-law, Lambert Crabtree having married Susie Prior, the second daughter, at Redcot, eight years before.

John Prior knew better. The marriage had been none of his making. He had disliked it from first to last, though he had no tangible excuse for opposing the match. He was sensible that neither ties of kindred nor personal feeling would hinder his son-in-law from hastening to make the best of his bargain. He was the last man likely to propose a compromise, as John Prior would have been the last to suggest one, though his silence had robbed him of his sole remaining chance. There was no hope of Lambert Crabtree's re-selling his recent acquisition, even if the squire of Redcot had been able to buy it—none of his (Crabtree's) dallying generously with his good fortune, or lingering with tender reluctance till a hoary head was laid under the turf.

Accordingly, it was no surprise to the elder man to find the younger figuring without loss of time as a public benefactor and a man of the world, above private considerations. A party of experienced miners—one or two of

them John Prior's former servants, supposed to hold the secrets of his mines, began to bore on Ladslove in search of the Redcot coal-seam, which had been hewn into and demolished in its original thickness and straightness, till its tapering and shallow point, full of 'hitches' and 'dykes,' was all that was left in the old ground. But there was plenty of scientific presumption that the opposite run of the seam under the lands of Ladslove carried it on in its pristine solidity and uniformity, a mine of black diamonds—hard as ebony in its jetty hue, rich in gas, perhaps cropping up near the surface, so as to be worked with little trouble or expense—a fortune to its happy finder.

It was the boring party that John Prior watched, day after day, from Redcot Quarry, which commanded the Ladslove meadows, especially those fields accounted the most promising for the quest.

The squire had been an enthusiastic geologist in his day—perhaps all the more so that,

though he was a coalowner, he was not a practical coalmaster; that is, his pits were in the hands of an efficient manager. John Prior had felt the fascination of the science of the solid rocks which, to the eager student, is as full of charm as that of the vaulted sky. The one promises to lay bare the colossal history of past ages, the other allures with the dim glories of coming cycles of time. But this student could not have explained why mining rumour and geological data had failed so far, only he was convinced that he, and he alone, knew the very spot which would yield the treasure. It was not the point indicated either by popular belief or by scientific demonstration. The borers had boldly charged both spots without any results worth mentioning, for common tradition, like common rumour, is apt to lie, and mineralogy, like other sciences, sometimes argues without its host. The rocks of the earth, whether deposited by floods or volcanoes, seem occasionally as if they took a perverse

pleasure in appearing and disappearing at will, tilting up and sliding down, coming to a dead halt when least expected to stop, vanishing as if they were as transitory as the flowers of the field.

Nevertheless, the master of Redcot was satisfied of the reality of his conviction. Away in the Dutch clover meadow to the right, as he looked down from the quarry, by the Rats' Ditch—an unusually deep ditch, almost as deep as the Redcot Well, the sides of which, when cautiously laid bare and narrowly examined, betrayed certain unmistakable traces—the lost coal was hidden. It might be elsewhere, radiating from the centre. John Prior was not prepared to affirm or deny the possibility, but the one hope that remained to him was that there was but a single seam in this bed, and that the borers might miss it. Such narrow chances had been before now in the annals of mining.

The ordeal had been already prolonged

over a period of months, since the harvest had cleared away the corn. Every day it seemed to the man, isolated and desperate in what was at once his torturing knowledge and his equally torturing ignorance, that the crisis approached nearer, that the busy matter-of-fact unconscious group of labouring men, with their shovels and picks, and their rods like divining rods, had more certainly the fortunes of the Priors of Redcot in a horny grip.

Yet John Prior need not have contented himself with stalking in a stealthy fashion to his quarry of observation, and watching from afar the operations of the borers. He might have gone down among them openly, and looked for himself at what was drawn from the recesses of the rocks. He need not have scrupled to do so, even though, as had often happened, Lambert Crabtree, after his morning in the bank, took his afternoon ride to Ladslove, and stayed ten or twenty minutes hearing the report and examining the pile of 'rubbish.'

There was no actual quarrel between the relations by marriage. There had never been any close friendship to be cruelly, if foolishly, wounded by the course Lambert Crabtree was pursuing. His conduct had been simply what might have been looked for in the man. John Prior was too proud to resent it actively, while Crabtree himself was too plausible to provoke such resentment. There had been a little gratuitous bluster on the delinquent's part, ignored by his father-in-law. The coolness between the men, who were naturally antagonistic, deepened a shade or two; but there was no open breach between the families; they continued on visiting terms.

It was John Prior's free choice that he should look on from a distance at the decision of his fate. He had been doing it with few intermissions for a long time, and he felt he had become almost accustomed to the proceeding, though at intervals it struck him still as maddening. After a little experience he had selected

the period of the day when the men were in the habit of testing their success or failure, and of changing their stations, sinking or withdrawing the boring rods, as the case might be. Sometimes, as had happened on the day referred to, the working party were delayed by officious advice and interference, or by an orgie the previous night and a corresponding fit of laziness the following morning, such as colliers of all men are prone to, and the gang had barely got time to put up their gear, when darkness had intervened and set them free. On other days the men would work diligently, as with a private impulse of confidence and alacrity ; for if there were pits at Ladslove as well as at Redcot, competition would force the masters' hands, and the colliers would be able to name their own wages. Their good time would have come.

Every now and then the borers approached perilously near the Dutch clover meadow and the Rats' Ditch. Once they were actually

within a few yards of the former, and John Prior's eyes grew dim and his heart stood still. There was no dinner for him that evening, no sleep that night. But nothing came of the accidental hit, and the next planting of the apparatus was further than ever from the goal. It was like a game which children play when one of them hides some article fixed upon, and the others, who have been shut out of the room, troop in and seek, the hider looking on, his eyes sparkling with the pride of power, and shouting 'hot' or 'cold,' to encourage or deter the seekers as they approach or recede from the object of their search. The master of Redcot had seen his grandchildren, full of glee, playing at the game on one of these last evenings. It had faintly recalled similar sport among his children almost a generation back, in which he, still a young man, had been inclined to join on occasions—on a birthday or on Christmas Eve. This conversion of the game into grim earnest was like a ghastly travesty of the children's

gambols, and he was not without a crazy impulse to complete the similitude by hoarsely calling ‘hot as fire, my men ;’ ‘nay, lukewarm,’ ‘cold as stone, you idiots,’ as an appropriate chorus to the workmen’s uncertain steps.

At times, when John Prior’s mind was not at full stretch, it relieved its oppression by straying a little from the purpose of his standing there, and from the November aspect of the quarry. He remembered former visits to the place at more genial seasons. He had a fancy that he had brought his young wife here just when the quarry had been deserted for a sufficient space to permit the first fine sprouting of vegetation which had resulted in the tangled over-growth before him. He had stopped her from pricking her fingers by gathering the wild rose, which she stuck in the belt that women wore then, the belt to a white muslin gown—another old-fashion. He had come here with little Jack after the rabbits, and he rather thought the boy’s first shot had reverberated from the

rocks there. He had brought the little girls to show them the chaffinches' and whin sparrows' nests among the bushes. Susie had always been the most forward, the most meddlesome. He had held the small hand tightly in his to prevent her snatching at the contents of the nests while she chattered. Once she had slipped away on the road home, run back and clambered over the stones, well nigh at the risk of the child's life, in order to pilfer to her heart's content. She had dropped the eggs and fledglings from her frock, breaking and bruising them, so as to leave behind her a murderous track that infallibly condemned her. Jane, and even Jack, had cried at the wanton, wholesale destruction which Susie had wrought for her petty delectation, but the culprit herself had not been particularly penitent, in spite of strong representations and sharp chastisement.

John Prior groaned inwardly over these earlier recollections before he dismissed them, pulled himself together, got rid with an effort

of the stiffness produced by his long continuance in one constrained position, scrambled down to the opening into the quarry, issued from it, and took his way by the offices and the stables to the house of Redcot. He walked wearily, notwithstanding his struggle to the contrary. His gaunt figure drooped, his strongly-marked face had a set harshness, a grey tint was stealing through the ruddy brown of his country complexion. Indelible signs of his vigils in the quarry were beginning to be imprinted on the malleable iron of John Prior's outward man, and would never leave it till it fell away in the blurred colourlessness and shapelessness of death, after its first hard, cold seal had been pressed down, had settled for a time, and then yielded to the decay of all mortal things.

CHAPTER III.

REDCOT INTERIOR, AND THE WOMEN OF THE FAMILY.

JOHN PRIOR walked to his house across a corner of what was more an old-fashioned paddock, with extensive shrubberies girdling a lawn intersected by an avenue of lime trees, than anything so imposing as a park.

Redcot was of some antiquity, but no great dignity, unless that of age and rambling space. The building had been a farm-house at one time, but so venerable a farm-house that it became, after all, a question whether the place did not date back to a homely manor-house in the days when the lines between yeomen, squires, and farmers were by no means so sharp as in later generations. Picturesqueness had

not been aimed at in the low square building put down in a hollow, and encumbered with offices—some of which had been cleared away, while others, though empty and disused, remained a monument of the unhesitating simplicity of our ancestors, who were not ashamed of their apple-rooms and cheese-rooms, their barns and thrashing mills, their cow-houses and pig-styles, any more than of their stables and kennels, their dairies and poultry yards. The greatest improvement after the removal of the said cow-house and pig-style had been in the gradual laying out of the lawn and shrubberies until they had attained a respectable amount of order and beauty—all the more attractive that the style was a little antiquated with stack-shaped hollies and gable-pointed yews, and a pleasant garden opening out of a cunning labyrinth of shrubs. The scene was not marred in any way by Mr. Prior's pits. These were out of sight, sound, and smell, miles away on Kershaw Moor. Indeed, although mines and

miners were at the root of the family prosperity or adversity, they did not come to any great extent into the Priors' outward life.

The house was not heavily draped like the quarry. There was a prejudice a century or two ago against ivy and clematis, jessamine and roses, as promoters of damp, and nests for wasps, spiders, and earwigs. That prejudice rode roughshod over whole sets of utilitarian and straightforward householders. One advantage of the absence of creepers was that the brick walls were as mellow and mossy as the garden wall, the passion for dryness having fortunately stopped short of perpetual scraping, pointing, and painting fiery-red. The windows had retained their stone mullions and small panes, as if in obliging anticipation of the freak of retrogression in modern taste, while, unencumbered by leaves, the light was let into the long, low-roofed rooms with a cheerful prosaic candour, not so much approved by æsthetic dogma.

No doubt it was from a mere accident that so much remained the same within as well as without at Redcot. The master of the house on coming to his kingdom had been indifferent —rather averse to change. His wife had entertained a romantic reverence and affectionate fondness for the early landmarks which had come home to her personal experience. The panelled rooms—oak in the dining-room, and painted, in Philistine defiance of darkness, a clear French grey in the drawing-room—were as John Prior and his wife had found them, barring necessary repairs and renewals. There had been no complete clearing away of the original furniture. The one room was full of heavy mahogany and warm-tinted damask. The other was distinguished by spindle-legged rosewood, pale brocade protected by paler chintz, and a superabundance of glass and gilt decoration in the form of mirrors and girandoles, chandeliers, picture-frames, time-pieces, and tables lacquered to their very legs. Additions had been made

not always harmoniously. The most subduing element had been the lingering, softening touches of time, fading here and dimming there, till the whole had worn into a kind of tender congruity. This was not fatally marred by the pretended preciousness of the scalloped, inlaid slabs, and the fluted yellow legs of the side tables, or by the yawning mirrors over the prim marble chimney-pieces, and over the various doors of the room, reflecting pitilessly every object it contained, from the brittle porcelain basket on the cabinet, to the worked tulips and wall-flowers on the hearth-rug.

John Prior came in by a side door into a dark hall, where gun-cases and fishing-rods shouldered an umbrella stand and pegs for hats and wraps, and where stuffed birds kept in countenance engravings too brown to be easily distinguishable. There was one extraordinarily staring wooden picture of Judas and his Master which would have produced recoil in any spectator of average feeling, had not familiarity

robbed the picture of all meaning. The squire went straight to the drawing-room, advancing with a shiver to the fire, which glowed with an eclipsing lustre that seemed to ask the worsted tulips and wall-flowers what they were doing blooming there out of season? John Prior planted himself on the hearthrug, with his boots not free from the clay of the quarry, set doggedly on the tulips and wall-flowers. There was no relaxation of his muscles or sigh of satisfaction. In fact, he wanted more comfort than he got; he was looking round discontentedly at the absence of any preparation for afternoon tea, though five o'clock had not struck. He resented the silence of the only other occupant of the room, who had looked up on his entrance, and then resumed her book. It was like the women, he reflected in his bitterness, to make no provision for his requirements, and to take no interest in what was going on outside, though it might be a matter of life and death to him, and through him to them in their carelessness and heartless-

ness. Why *she*—she there sitting, engrossed with her trashy novel, or her equally frivolous, never-ending fancy work—fancy work, forsooth! a fit occupation for a woman of her years! or with her old useless, pampered brute of a dog, she knew perfectly, as well as he knew, that Lambert Crabtree was boring for coal on Ladslove, and any day might come upon it. Yet she did not ask a single question as to what he had heard and seen any more than if the boring were going on at Timbuctoo, or than if she had no more to do with it than her great-grandmother could have had. This was all the sympathy that he met with. But if she were to get a letter from her jackanapes and fool of a son telling her that his little finger ached, the whole house would hear of it.

It did not signify in the least, in the temper John Prior was in, that he frequently refused to look at afternoon tea, and that, the last time Mrs. Prior had ventured to inquire as to the result of the boring at Ladslove, he had angrily

protested, How should he know? She had better write to Susie, or Crabtree himself, and that would be going to headquarters—and not pester him. The subject was not particularly agreeable, and he had worries enough without this being continually dinned into his ears, &c., &c.

The offending Mrs. Prior did not look, on the most casual glance, like a woman deficient in natural feeling, though there was a certain patient peacefulness in her air and surroundings which might not be without its provocation to an irascible man. For a soft answer, contrary to the verdict of King Solomon, is sometimes the most aggravated offence to an angry disputant.

Mrs. Prior had never been, strictly speaking, a pretty woman. Her dress was old-fashioned —a lace shawl over a dark cashmere gown, and a soft white cap, shading silver-streaked hair. Everything was perfectly neat and by no means unbecoming to her tall, slight figure, and sallow,

delicately-outlined face, but the effect of the whole was that she looked older than she really was. She gave the impression that she must always have seemed rather homely and old-fashioned, with a sweet homeliness and old-fashionedness that might have been one of her charms to a certain order of mind, especially when there was plenty of intelligence and no lack of gentle breeding in the simple plainness and dash of quaintness.

Mrs. Prior's grey eyes were a little faded, but there lingered a light in them which contradicted the inference that there had ever been anything sympathetic or lifeless in the loyal conservatism and unaffected genuineness of the woman. On the contrary, a reader of physiognomy might have guessed that the native sprightliness which in this age of sentimental analysis and sublime discontent with the whole structure of the universe, moral as well as physical, is fast becoming a lost feminine grace, had been one of Mrs. Prior's out-of-date attractions long ago. She

might have had enough to say in her youth, though she was inopportunely silent at the present moment; and though the vestiges of her early vivacity were only to be detected by sharp eyes, and just pulled themselves together, as it were, and came to the front again by fits and starts.

In truth, Mrs. Prior had been left behind by most of her children. The eldest daughter, Alice, had married much earlier than her mother, and had seen far more of the world, having gone to India with her husband. She had even been called on to face the great mystery of death at a date before that at which Mrs. Prior had become a woman by right of the love passages between her and John Prior. Susie had possessed from her babyhood more triumphant worldly wisdom than her mother had acquired in all her fifty-five years. Jane, the youngest girl—still a girl and still at home—had kept her terms at a ladies' college, and was one of the earned products of the age. Only Jack, the

one son with his father's plain face and his mother's serene, sunny nature, did not drift away from her, but continued faithfully on the same level. And Jack Prior was foredoomed to be a scapegrace if it were but by his father's extreme disappointment because the son in whom he had centred his hopes showed no sign of retrieving in some unexplained manner the falling fortunes of the family. There was small justice in punishing Jack, because he did not fulfil unreasonable expectations for which the boy had given no warrant. But men like John Prior, the elder, however just in theory are seldom fair in practice.

In place of confirming the extravagant ideas entertained of him, young John Prior, disheartened and almost driven desperate by his father's irrational displeasure, brought back a greater reputation for scrapes and debts than for honours from college, and drifted about in a desultory fashion, wasting his time among friends with whom he was wonderfully popular,

who saved him from the hard necessity of living under the blight of his father's anger. At last Jack put the crown on his volatile follies rather than serious errors by suddenly taking what appeared an idle vagrant step in a lad who owned no more money than the allowance which his father could ill afford. The heir of Redcot went off on a voyage to Australia, without any apparent intention of becoming a colonist.

Mrs. Prior was forsaken even by Jack, except for the solace of the letters he sent to her, which, to do him justice, had come with tolerable regularity and frequency hitherto. She was left to her low wicker chair in a particular corner by the Redcot drawing-room hearth in winter, and by a special window in summer, to her unintermitting supply of novels, her interminable needlework, and her dog Tommy. The last was a superannuated, not particularly amiable blue Skye terrier. He had been in his bloom the children's cherished playfellow. He had even been a not unwelcome companion of

the children's father when Tommy had been the most active and joyous of rabbit-hunters and ratters. In those days Mrs. Prior's domestic happiness was also in its bloom, as she sometimes said, comparing notes with Tommy in an aside half-pathetic, half-tenderly humorous, in accordance with the nature of the woman. But the dog's time of nimbleness and unclouded ardour in sport was over, just as the woman was taken down from the pinnacle which most mothers and mistresses of households occupy at one period of their lives—an elevation of unapproachable wisdom and cleverness in the eyes of their offspring and dependants. Then a younger generation, with new standards and different wants, arises to pronounce with more or less impatience and carelessness or reverent reluctance, and regretful gentleness, that their predecessors are antiquated and insufficient in their ideas and capabilities.

When Mrs. Prior found herself thus outstripped in the race of life by her daughters,

there was undoubtedly a considerable amount of mild dignity in the manner in which she withdrew from the unequal contest, and ensconced herself in an elderly woman's fragment of a kingdom. She showed herself resolute and almost satisfied to wait till these well-armed children of hers had need of her again. For deep down in the mother's heart there was a conviction, half proud, half humble, and wholly tender and true, that human life was hardly likely to run its course without her human skill and experience, of so little account at present, coming into request once more.

It had been far worse for Mrs. Prior, and had caused an unhealing wound in her heart, to know that she was gradually becoming alienated from her husband. The reason for this was partly because her nature could not always touch his in the painful conditions under which he lived, but chiefly because she would not give up her son, whom he was doing his best to goad to destruction. The permanent

good understanding and unshaken faith between mother and son, in spite of what John Prior considered his ample grounds for complaint and indignation, exasperated him. He was still farther hurt by his grievous knowledge that all harmony between him and Jack was at an end, and that the father's confidence in the lad was gone as entirely as the elder man's high hopes and vaulting ambition.

Settled resentment was very difficult for Mrs. Prior, and the process by which it was brought about exquisitely painful to her. But she did continue to resent her husband's attitude towards their son. The resentment, however, did not alter the fact that her woman's nature was in its very susceptibility and delicacy more liberal and juster than the far stronger, but at the same time more headstrong and self-centred, nature of the man. She made allowance for him, so that in the middle of her dumb anger her heart sometimes ached for her husband with a positive intensity of aching.

John Prior stood fuming on the flowery hearth-rug. Mrs. Prior sat entrenched among her belongings. At one side of her was the basket with the rolls of linen and skeins of silk for the quilts which she had been embroidering ever since anybody could remember. Jane alleged with quiet disdain that any weaver could have woven better in a week at the most. At Mrs. Prior's elbow was her special book-case, in which the works of her favourite authors and the last volumes received from Mudie's were ranged. At the other side Tommy was stretched in slightly apoplectic slumber, while he was carefully sheltered from the danger of stray kicks. Every now and then she turned over a leaf of the book on which her eyes were fixed, where it lay in the comfortable hollow of the lap, formed by the raising of the small feet—hardly larger than Susie's—as they rested side by side on their footstool.

But though Mrs. Prior's attention appeared placidly concentrated on her own concerns, her

interest, even in an unusually good story, was by no means so great as to hinder a whole under-current of perturbed reflections and thronging anxieties, if John Prior could only have conceived what lay beneath the unruffled surface.

It was cold comfort, Mrs. Prior thought, for a man to come from the manifold troubles of the outer world into his own house, and not receive so much as a greeting given by those nearest to him. But what could she do? She did not know what to say. When she had spoken to him about this last torture the other day she had only succeeded in galling him. If she spoke on indifferent topics he would accuse her in his mind, if not in his speech, of hypocrisy. Would he never understand that respectful silence might imply the most thoughtful and considerate fellow-feeling and commiseration? If she closed her book, the action might imply that she expected him to tell her something; and she could not, though she had been his wife for thirty years, compel his confidence.

Would Jane never come in and ring for tea? Mrs. Prior was sure her husband was thoroughly chilled and craved a cup of tea this afternoon, though he was apt to despise the womanish indulgence. She might ring, of course, but it was customary for Jane to appear at five and order in tea. The hour had not yet struck, and Jane would descend with widely-open eyes, and a dignified inference that she had been disturbed in important occupations; while men hated the least fuss—if anything, objected more to it than to a slight delay.

Did John remember what addition there was to be to the family party at dinner, and who had proposed riding over in the course of the evening? Had he braced himself to bear the encounter in the conflict that raged within him, or had he forgotten the previous intimation, so that the disagreeable ordeal would take him by surprise? She longed to give him a warning, but she dared not do it. She was not prevented by fear of his wrath, since no more courageous

spirit ever breathed than existed in that simple, peaceable, determinedly cheerful woman, but his bitter words smote her like so many stones, and she not only smarted under them—they made her feel ashamed for him in whom she had once taken her greatest pride.

At last the clock struck five, and with the striking Jane Prior walked in. She was over the middle height and fairer in complexion than the rest of her family, with an expression of candour as well as of power of one sort on her broad open forehead. There was a corresponding look of sincerity in her somewhat cold blue eyes, which met her neighbour's fairly and fully, and in her full, straight, uncompromising mouth. The expression was impressive, and rather heightened her claims to being handsome. “A fine girl” was the epithet which rose to one's lips—well-grown, well-developed in every respect—a healthy mind in a healthy body—a character in which the intellectual predominated over the emotional. Unless a mania for study

overthrew its balance, it could be safely trusted to act logically and consistently.

Jane Prior was dressed with the strict severity of the last utilitarian mode, as opposed to the æsthetic standard and to Paris fashions. Her skirt was short, and not tight. She was destitute alike of unnecessary puffings and swathings. She had no butterfly bows and streaming ends of ribbon, though she had well-tied knots where knots were required, and the lace at her throat and wrists was as fresh and dainty as need be. The severity of her costume extended to the style in which her hair was worn. She had an abundance of hair, which had been flaxen in childhood, and was now what old-fashioned people call fawn or sandy-coloured. It was turned back from the square forehead, and wound round the head by the simplest, most orderly arrangement possible, which took the least time to accomplish, and when it was accomplished, was nearly incapable of disarrangement by hat or bonnet, or even by pre-occupied

hands pushing it from the temples, or restless fingers thrust through the tight folds. Altogether Jane's toilet suited her admirably. She would have been out of place in trailing robes or caught-up flounces, such as Susie affected, in accordance with the last inspiration of her artist friends or her French modiste. Jane would have looked still worse—actually grotesque, with Susie's fondly-trained fringe straying in artful artlessness to the verge of her arched eyebrows. But the result, if arrived at by any consciousness of Jane's, was the fruit of an instinctive sense of fitness which belonged to the girl, and not of any elaborate consideration.

Jane Prior came into the drawing-room looking straight before her, and, going directly to the bell, rang for tea. Yet, she had a little the air as if she only saw in part what was passing around her—as if her mind remained busy with some mathematical problem or metaphysical question which she had lately been seeking to solve. She stood by the little table, which still

wanted its tray and cups, her hands hanging down, loosely clasped before her, as silent, though not as glum, as her father. The atmosphere about her was meditative and engrossed, though not so as to cause her to forget the hour or neglect her duty of being there to ring for tea and pour it out.

No light girlish chat was to be expected from Jane ; something more valuable perhaps, but not the current coin so easily exchanged in the intercourse of daily life. If she spoke just now it would be to make some brief unanswerable observation as to whether the water was boiling, or the cream as it should be, for Jane, though verging on asceticism in her personal tastes and practices, was strict in demanding the fulfilment of household obligations. Or she would address to her father some inquiry with regard to his old college classes and classics, which he could not refuse to answer, though at the present moment he felt inclined to regard it as impertinent.

But it was Mr. Prior and not his daughter

who broke the silence, which was awkward and constrained, between husband and wife, and quite unconstrained and very much a matter of course, where Jane was in question, between father and daughter.

‘Where are the children?’ he asked shortly, as if he must find fault with something in the circumstances, though if they had been altered in one respect it would have been the presence and not the absence of the children to which he would have objected.

‘They cannot leave the school-room,’ answered Jane with calm decision. ‘I have had them near me the whole of the afternoon, yet Ally has not been able to parse half a page, Tom’s spelling to dictation is frightful, and it really looks as if that boy Sam were never to know his letters. I wish I could give them more time, and if nurse would only let them rise at six instead of seven it might be managed.’

Here Mrs. Prior interposed, which she seldom did now, even on behalf of her grandchildren,

whom Jane had appropriated in the most meritorious manner. Indeed, Jane was doing so much for her dead sister's children—taking so great an interest in them—even sacrificing a good deal that she prized highly on their account, that Mrs. Prior, with her conscientiousness, kindness, and foresight, scrupled to interfere between the young aunt and her charge. 'Jane has earned a right to say what is best for the poor little things, and though she makes mistakes like all young rulers, she is remarkably judicious on the whole, unless on this question of education, where nurse has been a sufficient check hitherto. The children will have Jane to turn to when I have ceased to be of much use to them; their mother's contemporary is her natural substitute, doubtless.' So thought Mrs. Prior, and she contented herself with a casting vote on the side of such grandmotherly indulgences as Jane would hear of. She felt called upon to utter a remonstrance to-day, and either because of the rarity of the remonstrance, or

because it was a welcome reminder of what, if Jane conducted the matter in her own way, as she was tolerably sure to do—would certainly be a relief to her, the interference was received very graciously.

‘ You get up too early already, my dear,’ said her mother, ‘ and the children need more sleep than you do. Wait till they get their governess, and she will set these troubles to rights.’

‘ Yes ; I find I must begin immediately to look out for a governess,’ chimed in Jane, briskly. ‘ The difficulty is where to get a thoroughly good one, for I will have no make-shift—no poor creature of a nursery governess with a little bad music and worse French to cover her boundless ignorance. I am determined the children shall be well grounded from the very beginning.’

‘ Humph !’ was all the remark John Prior made on this praiseworthy stipulation, and a very sarcastic ‘ humph !’ it was. He remem-

bered the gratified pride with which he had first discovered his little daughter Jane's unusual amount of brain power, and the interest he had taken in its proper development. What had it all come to? It had rendered Jane unlike other girls—at least the girls he had known—a gain doubtful in itself. She was self-reliant, certainly, but the self-reliance was not always agreeable. She was constantly occupied with her studies, and seemed to follow the pursuit of knowledge with unflagging zest. She did not seek for other entertainment than she could procure for herself at small cost. She had excellent health, in spite of her occasional eccentricities and absurdities. But, after all, her mind and memory were not better endowed and equipped than the average mind and memories of fairly intelligent and industrious undergraduates. Yet she was an exceptional woman for the other women like daws to peck at, who had not been able to escape entirely a shade of self-consciousness and pedantry, though being the real not the ficti-

tious woman of culture, she was as free from such objectionable qualities as could reasonably have been expected.

But John Prior had never been reasonable in his expectations, and he had not counted on the possible loss involved in Jane's acquirements. Neither was he reasonable in his apprehensions. He never knew when Jane might not make some extravagant display of the student or professor in petticoats, when she might not propose to quit Redcot and the protection of her father and mother, in order to take the head of a grammar school for girls, if such a place existed, or such an appointment came in her way. He should not like it, though he was, according to his own belief, to a great extent free from class prejudices, and though his youngest daughter was neither particularly useful—apart from her care of the little Woods—nor particularly ornamental at home, neither could she be said to contribute much to the sociality of the family. If it had been her brother who inherited Jane's brains

something might have come of them, and Jane might have had Jack's senselessly light-hearted temper and dangerously-accommodating ways, which were worse than useless in a man, with some advantage to a woman and a stay-at-home daughter. But, then, everything had gone wrong with the squire of Redcot, even to the distribution of character and ability among his children. John Prior was not an irreligious or irreverent man, and there had been a time when his faith and his views of life had been in harmony; but they seemed to have passed into hopeless discord.

CHAPTER IV.

SUSIE AND LAMBERT CRABTREE.

BEFORE tea was over, a sudden stir in opening doors and advancing steps became audible in the Redcot drawing-room. Susie Crabtree entered in the easiest, most graceful manner, with the most perfect security of a welcome. She brought in with her as the very atmosphere which surrounded her, in which she lived and breathed, a totally different influence from what had been there before she came.

Susie Crabtree was a very pretty little woman by nature. She was past her first youth, but she did her best by the adventitious aid of a choice and elaborate toilet, which more than supplies the early graces time steals away, in

the eyes of many thousands of women, and of not a few men—though where the last are concerned the substitute is only a vague charm to tickle the male fancy.

Susie's beauty was of the daintiest, most fragile order, apparently, though in reality she had never known a day's illness that could not have been satisfactorily accounted for in the whole course of her life. She was small and brown beside her younger sister, but the smallness was a perfectly modelled fairy-queen sort of smallness, and the brown was the soft richly-tinted olive of a brilliant brunette. The almond-shaped dark eyes, with their glance hovering between a coquettish sparkle and a slightly languishing repose, were in keeping with the rest of the face. So were the other features. The straight little nose was a trifle sharp, if it had not been for the beauty of the line from the brow, and the nostrils were thin and semi-transparent. The short upper lip curled, while the under lip was just full enough to atone for

a suspicion of narrowness in the red streak above it. The pearly teeth showed between. The chin was round—a shade too round, threatening, in conjunction with the low forehead, a certain finer animalism as the years rolled on.

But the years had not rolled on as yet, and Susie Crabtree was still little beyond the zenith of her beauty, which was preserved and greatly promoted, as she firmly believed, by the unstinted thought and time and the lavish expenditure of Lambert Crabtree's money freely devoted to that end. They had procured her bonnet, mantle, and gown from the most highly esteemed sources.

For it must not be supposed that Mrs. Crabtree attempted anything by halves, or that she could not accomplish what she wished in the best manner possible. She was a clever as well as a pretty woman of her kind—one who had little to do with book learning beyond the fair education for a woman of her rank. But this was enough to lend her all she wanted—a

tolerable familiarity with the topics of the day, an easy assumption of the tone of her society whatever it might be, a curious tact, amounting to mother-wit, which picked up, assimilated, and reproduced any scraps of the jargon of the schools, any morsel of affectation of this or that devotion to French criticism, German music, or pre-Raphaelite Italian art which, floating down the generations, drifted into queer corners. Anything so solid and thorough as Jane's knowledge would have crushed Susie with her airs and graces out of existence.

Susie Crabtree had still less moral force and insight bred of largeness of heart, crystal-clear uprightness and delicately-keen conscientiousness than she had book-learning. But she had no end of *savoir faire*, and a good artistic taste, barring that it was subservient to one class of decorators and milliners, and one school of American authors, oddly enough.

Mrs. Crabtree had been making some calls of ceremony before she came on to her father's

place ; besides, she had no objection to exhibit her most charming visiting costume to her mother and sister. She had a secret impression that they must admire and envy it, though they did not seem very appreciative. Her mother looked at Susie's dress and praised it, certainly, but it was with a child's simple surprise and pleasure, and, at the same time, with the good-natured indulgence which a grown woman might show to a child. Now, what Susie wanted was intelligent admiration, and a wistful craving—amounting to a flattering grudge against the wearer of the clothes—to be as beautifully and fashionably dressed as the wife of the county magnate, Lambert Crabtree, the Newton banker.

Some ecstatic women would have called Susie's marvellously 'quiet,' but unapproachable, bonnet 'a perfect love.' Nothing could exceed the truth of the curves of her closely-fitting mantle to the lines of her shapely figure. The velvet material, with its deep border of rich

fur, was sumptuous without gorgeousness, and though she was not tall enough to carry off splendour by stateliness, she did it by sheer elegance. The texture and hue of her gown were equally commendable in their delightful combination of softness, lightness, and a dead-leaf duskiness, which was yet not ashen, but shot through and through with mellow russet. Her many-buttoned gloves and boots followed suit, so did her exquisite muff. There could be no doubt that Susie Crabtree was exceedingly well-dressed, according to the present artistic but not altogether rational or convenient fashion, and she beamed brightly out of her dress one of the prettiest women in the county. As this was the object of her ardent desires, its attainment contributed largely to her satisfaction.

For that matter, Susie was an extremely well-satisfied woman in nearly every respect. She had not all that she could wish, but she had almost all that was within her reach, and she was far too astute in worldly wisdom to cry for

the moon. As a proof of her moderation, she was only slightly disturbed on the present occasion by an irresistible, unwelcome conviction which occurred to her. Her unmarried sister had made the huge blunder of electing to be that odd personage—altogether undesirable, though less hooted at now than formerly—a full-fledged blue-stocking ; and here she was coolly regarding Susie's matronly honours and graceful magnificence without a particle either of fascination, homage, or aching covetousness. Susie did not deceive herself in reference to Jane's feelings, but neither did she trouble herself to resent them. She was too contented to be cross, and liked popularity too well to make herself disagreeable. There might be something insolent in her happiness, founded as it was on her success in life, to unhappy and unfortunate people ; but the insolence was in the source of the happiness, not in the manner of its expression.

Susie tripped into the Redcot drawing-room

neither too fast nor too slow, so as not to miss something gliding in her gait. She kissed Mrs. Prior and Jane with due affectionateness, put up her face with filial fondness for her father to kiss, then subsided into her chair to be much made of, to make much of her relatives in a way that was hard to resist. ‘Here I am, mamma and papa.’ Susie retained the old childish terms which Jane had renounced long before. Mrs. Crabtree even gave them an additional babyishness—an affectation borrowed from some of her American cousins. She pronounced papa pa-pa, and mamma mam-ma. ‘I am so glad to see you both, with Janie into the bargain. How are the babies? But I need not ask, for I saw the little heads tolerably ruffled, in the matter of hair, through the schoolroom window as I passed. Oh! dear; I wish you would, some of you, come down to Newton and manage our babies, since they are quite too much for Lamb and me. They are never to be found in the nurseries—you know, the children

roam all over the house. Yesterday Molly called me Simple Susan to my face, and Piers clenched his fist at Lamb.' Then followed more chatter. 'Oh ! mam-ma, dear, I had better tell you at once that you must excuse me, for I have no change of dress with me. I must sit down to dinner as I am, if you will sit down to table with me. Of course I can lay aside my bonnet and mantle, and Janie may let me have a fichu. I was uncertain up to the last moment whether Lamb could get rid in time of that nice old Mr. Hutchinson, who comes over about bank business, and must stay to dinner. I ought to have stayed too, and I should really have liked to entertain the old gentleman, he is so deliciously gallant and courtly, but I had promised to come to you. Only, if Lamb had not been able to ride over and escort me back, I must have begged off, though I should almost have broken my heart. One has so little good of the moon in such cloudy weather, and the roads are so heavy for the horses ; and, what is

after all the true state of the matter, I am such a timid little goose.'

There was not a grain of feeling, shy or abashed, in Susie's manner—not a hint of being aware of the fact that her husband was at that moment poaching, as it were, on what had been the Redcot preserves—the sole coal-mines in the district for three-quarters of a century. There was not a shade of distress that his success in the search he was carrying out at Ladslove must mean sooner or later ruin to the Priors.

There was not a Prior there—least of all John Prior—who could help feeling astonished by the ease and fluency with which Susie ignored the crow to pluck between the two houses. It was a pleasant philosophy that partook of effrontery. But, on second thoughts, every Prior, from the oldest to the youngest, was ready to admit that Susie's conduct was not only the best policy ; it was the least disturbing under the circumstances. The family felt relieved by

it. They went near to owing her gratitude for it. Mrs. Prior and Jane began to talk, so far as to meet Mrs. Crabtree's amusing chat on the topics of the neighbourhood, and, with a slightly wider range, of the day, the whole having just the dash of purely personal and trivial details—such as the behaviour of her babies, the next dinner she was going to, the club-book she was reading—which kept it from sounding stilted and forced. Even Mr. Prior chimed in with a sentence occasionally.

‘Have you heard that the Marlowes are going abroad in February?’ said Susie, as fresh tea was brought for her.

‘Yes, Mr. Marlowe told me yesterday,’ answered Mrs. Prior, stroking down the lace at her cuffs, as she had a habit of doing.

‘It is devoutly to be hoped,’ continued Susie, with her lavish friendliness, ‘that Mr. Marlowe will benefit much more by his flight from the spring east winds than he did last year. I have given her all sorts of commis-

sions, though people do say you get things as good and cheap at home nowadays. I dare-say they are right. I daresay it is not an invention of the British tradesman.'

'Have you heard whether Arthur Norris has taken a scholarship at Oxford?' asked Jane, while Susie dawdled with her cup.

'Yes ; a Balliol scholarship—the best going. His uncle is very much pleased ; so is everybody,' declared Susie, sympathetically, 'and I should be enchanted if he needed help. However, his comparative wealth is unavoidable, and is not to be regretted otherwise. Besides, Mr. Norris says that where rich and poor alike go in for scholarships, it prevents their bestowal becoming a mere charitable institution, and lends them dignity. I'm sure I don't know about the dignity, but I'm ready to take it on Mr. Norris's word.'

'Why did Arthur not enter his father's college? George Norris was an Oriel man,' objected Mr. Prior.

‘I can’t tell, pa-pa. I daresay he thought Balliol more aristocratic, or influential, or something. Oh, Jane, do you know I am so delighted with the recent discoveries at Herculaneum!—another tomb, and a torso of Hercules freshly excavated.’

‘I think you are mistaken,’ said Jane, with sensitive exactness. ‘The tomb is at Baiae and the torso is of Bacchus.’

‘Ah, well,’ assented Susie in careless acquiescence. ‘No doubt you are right. Lamb and I saw the place, I know. These are treasures of which we cannot have too many. I say, pa-pa, what do you think of the prospects of the English in Egypt? That is what it comes to, is it not, though we give ourselves out as the arbiters and peacemakers of the universe? Lamb says politics are beyond me?’

‘They are beyond most of us, Crabtree included,’ exclaimed John Prior, a little impatiently, throwing himself into his chair.

‘I am not so sure of that,’ maintained Susie,

artlessly, 'when I think that Piers may grow up to be a man and join one or other of the services, and the Government has so much to do with the army and navy.'

'In voting supplies, do you mean?' asked John Prior, raising his eyebrows. But Susie was off on a new tack.

'Mam-ma, can you give me a cure for Molly's sucking her thumb?'

So it ran on in an enlivening, almost refreshing flow, to which the Priors contributed a drop or two occasionally.

In spite of himself John Prior was diverted from his care, soothed by the diversion and gently titillated. He came, indeed, under Susie's spell, not without a vague sense of self-contempt and a fresh sting dealt by memory. There had been a time when he had been fool enough to hug himself on his charming little daughter's beauty and her winning ways as she grew from childhood to girlhood. Then he had been deeply morti-

fied and aggrieved by what he had been powerless to prevent—her throwing herself away on Lambert Crabtree. Now, while she still retained some of the intoxicating elements of her beauty, her graciousness and her folly, which had more cleverness, of a kind, about it, than other women's wisdom possessed, it was a case of—

As the husband is, so the wife is.

It was worse. The father felt forced to see that there was really no mental or moral deterioration in Susie. In the spring-time of her attractions his child and her mother's child had never been actually above Lambert Crabtree in spiritual fibre. The marriage had been a clear instance of like drawing to like. The idea was detestable to John Prior.

Lambert Crabtree did not hesitate to look in for a few moments at Redcot in the course of the evening. He came over ostensibly with the good-natured purpose of quieting his wife's nerves by riding home at the side of her

carriage. Yet he was not ordinarily a gallant, though he was an exceedingly indulgent husband. He gave Susie what she had bargained for in the marriage. She repaid him in the same coin. When the transaction was completed they did not see much of each other. They appeared to have tacitly agreed to go their several ways—which were not similar ways—as independently as any couple like them, who are still on perfectly amicable terms.

Susie was thankful that she had escaped the narrowing circumstances at Redcot with the growing morbidness and moodiness of her father's temper. She was highly gratified by her kingdom at Newton. Lambert Crabtree got from Susie all that he wanted. He remained proud of her beauty and pleasantness. He appreciated her sense in not asking from him what he could not give. Still these terms, excellent as they were so far, were hardly the kind which cause a husband to take a long ride after the work and worry of the day, in

order to share an expedition of his wife's, and have an hour or so more of her society.

Susie's husband was big and red, with prominent light eyes. He was fifteen years older than his wife, while he affected a somewhat youthful, sportsman-like style of dress, was fond of white cords, coloured vests, and coloured neckties, and altogether was coarse-looking for a man of gentle birth. He did not take off his riding-coat, and came into the Redcot drawing-room with his whip hanging out of one pocket.

John Prior received his son-in-law with scrupulous politeness, though he would not come to close quarters with him. Lambert Crabtree's tactics were totally different from his wife's. In place of strictly avoiding any allusion in the conversation between the two men to the cause of mortal offence the younger was giving; in place of getting up a mist and glamour of indifferent talk on every conceivable topic, the intruder would have approached the subject with constitutional brazenness and bluster, and

endeavoured to have made his own out of it. He was quite capable of saying, ' You know business is business, Prior. We men understand that we must look after our own interests, and leave the devil to pay. We need not pretend to mawkish sentiment because we cannot avoid treading on each other's corns as we go our various ways.'

It was more than probable that the Priors owed the brief pleasure of Lambert Crabtree's company to some half-formed intention of taking the bull by the horns, to serve the challenger's ends. One of Susie's witty affectations was to call her husband invariably by a pretty abbreviation of his name, which was grotesquely inappropriate. ' Wolf' would have been more like the man, John Prior had growled, ' not that Susie is anything of a Red Riding Hood.'

But John Prior was slightly prejudiced. The big red-faced banker of squire descent was nearer a bull-dog ; he had nothing of the nobility of a mastiff hanging on like grim death

to his prey. There was a certain bluffness in his burliness which, to be sure, went a long way with some people in persuading them of his honesty, and a clumsiness in his utmost cunning that disarmed invidious suspicion, but which nevertheless did not belong to the true wolf or fox breed.

Mr. Prior had no difficulty in distancing Crabtree, when he made such obviously tentative speeches as 'Nasty raw weather, bad for field operations of all kinds. Push and pluck are nowhere in such an atmosphere. Nothing but hunting keeps a man's blood in circulation. Hang it ! the poor devils who have to stand about on your coal hills and pit heads which I passed on my ride are to be pitied unless they keep up jolly furnace fires and have recourse to them every five minutes. Can you trust them to stick to their machinery night and day? Don't you find them sending you very blank reports under the depression of such a long-continued beastly chill ? '

The person appealed to would not swallow the bait and open fire on his grievance. He would not fling out the sneering retort —‘Boring is not warmer work than stacking coal—is it?’ His reply was strictly to the point, while it was as freezing as the air complained of.

‘No, the weather don’t signify to speak of. The men are accustomed to exposure, and for those who are below ground the temperature is much the same at all seasons.’

His stern impassiveness and his adhering to his own side of the question baffled his assailant, who could bully or swagger, or even cajole a little, but who could not go about the bush to any purpose. He was forced to turn aside to Mrs. Prior and Jane, ‘How goes the last novel, mamma?’ he also said mamma with a cool assumption of intimacy. ‘Tommy not showing any symptoms of mange, I hope? It is as well that young beggar Piers does not come in his way. Half the dogs in Newton have had to be

choked off the little rascal—he will grab at their tails.'

' Dear me ! that is not safe for the child, cried Mrs. Prior, rising to the peril of her grandson. ' Why does his nurse let him ? Susie, are you sure the servant—is it Marianne still?—is trustworthy ? '

' Sure, mam-ma,' declared Susie, with a melodious laugh. ' It is Marianne still, and she is as good as gold. It is too bad of Lamb to frighten you.'

' Do Tommy and Sammy never give you scares ? ' inquired Mr. Crabtree, innocently.

' Tom and Sam are accustomed to do as they are bidden,' interposed Jane, with dignity ; ' and they do not think there is any particular manliness or any great fun in teasing animals.'

' Ah ! they are under your superior training, Jane. Why don't you come over to Newton and give Piers a lesson ? Neither Susie nor I would be in the least jealous. But I forget the loss of time in tackling these wretched children.

What cube root are you extracting at this date, Aunt Jane? Who is the old classic humbug to whom you are going down on your knees? Ladies do nothing by halves. The hoary sinners were never tired flooring me until I made up my mind to leave them to the dust of ages. Or do you go in for science at present—fixed stars, artesian wells, the law of gravity in motion, or some other impractical balderdash ?'

From the specimen of the badinage which always formed a large part of Lambert Crabtree's social intercourse with the women of his acquaintance, it may be judged that his particular kind of manliness—well enough born and bred as he was—did incline to exhibit itself in teasing something young people, or cats and dogs. It may be guessed from whom his little son Piers inherited some of his infantile propensities.

‘Come along, Susie ; we must start without farther loss of time,’ was rather a grateful sound to Lambert Crabtree’s kindred by marriage.

But, on the whole, Mrs. Prior was disposed to hope a perilous visit had passed off tolerably well till John Prior burst out, the moment the door was closed, with the fierce protest—‘If Susie cannot come here by herself, she had better stay away. If she will bring that big brute and blackguard—I tell you he is a blackguard as well as a brute,’ in angry answer to an unspoken protest in the horrified look of his wife—‘I have suspected it all along—I am sure of it at last—I must make myself scarce. It must be either he or I. The same house, if it is my house, shall not hold us both.’

Mrs. Prior said nothing. She did not know what to say that could do any good.

Jane opened her eyes wide in deprecation. As is usual with the young, she sat in judgment without hesitation. Her father’s violence struck her as equally uncalled for and unbecoming. She was not undutiful or deficient in attachment to him. She was a good deal more capable of veneration than that pretty, pleasant little crea-

ture Susie had ever been. Jane did not like to blame either of her parents; but she did wish that her father could see things in a more philosophic light, that he could preserve a more philosophic attitude. It was hard for him of course that Susie's husband should take it into his head to bore for coal on Ladslove; but even if the coal were found, it would only be a diminution of income at Redcot. Jane presumed there would still be enough for the necessaries of life. Many a sage and scholar had possessed less, had been the poorest of the poor, without fret. The mere likelihood of poverty was surely not enough to cause fuss and strife.

CHAPTER V.

IN SEARCH OF AN 'ADMIRABLE CRICHTON.'

JANE PRIOR set about her inquiries for a governess on behalf of the little Woods in the most exhaustive fashion. The children were young, and were still only in the elementary stage of their education ; but Jane had determined that the rudiments should be well seen to. She was an ardent supporter of the modern opinion that the foundation is of paramount importance, and that the insufficient foundations laid by incompetent hands are largely accountable for the failure in general knowledge, even in general capacity, of the present generation.

Jane went far to believing that a thorough acquaintance with philology is necessary for

the proper teaching of the alphabet. She must have had a hankering for the first letters to be Greek or Hebrew, but here her common sense interposed. She was determined at least that poor Alice's children should have the chance of becoming deeply erudite prodigies of 'all-round' culture. They should have such advantages as Jane herself had not enjoyed. Yet her father and mother had done the best they knew of for her. John Prior had even taken pains, when he learnt the talents and tastes of the girl, to impart something of his own college training to her, by making her read along with her brother Jack under a Cambridge coach of some eminence.

But then this was comparatively late in Jane's life, and she still suffered, as she honestly believed, from having been taught her letters by Alice and Susie's old governess. She had been an exemplary, old-fashioned lady, who was so inconsistent as to pique herself on her proficiency in such modern languages as French

and Italian, when she had never been taught a word of Latin, who could triumphantly produce a musical certificate from a German conservatorium, but whose arithmetic was not strong enough to have secured her a situation as bookkeeper in any tradesman's shop.

Jane, with an almost pathetic sense of her latent deficiencies from early neglect, went about her search for an efficient governess, where her small niece and nephews were concerned, in the most earnest, methodical manner, profoundly impressed as she was with the importance of the appointment. Nothing moved her. She was unscathed by her father's sarcasms on the uselessness and the cost of the acquisition. For Alice Prior had married a man in the civil service who had not been very fortunate in his career and was still struggling up-hill in his profession, so that John Prior had undertaken as a matter of course the rearing of the children sent home to their dead mother's relatives.

Mrs. Prior's natural alarm at the intrusion of another learned woman into the family fell still more flat. Jane told her mother with the utmost conviction that not only would a female Porson condescend to teach the young idea how to shoot without a thought of condescension ; she would be struck by a grand comprehensiveness of the undertaking, which would have utterly escaped the shallow conclusions of pert frivolous ignorance. Then why did Jane herself not devote all her energies to the noble enterprise, and sacrifice everything else ? Just because Jane did not feel equal to it. She was by no means fully equipped as yet ; she had a great deal of solitary study before her, ere she could aspire to have fairly grappled—even grappled—with the branches she had taken up, and she had that lamentable instability of foundation which she was afraid would cripple her to the day of her death.

Jane could also assure her mother, and here Mrs. Prior was more inclined to believe

her daughter, that she might depend upon finding the female Porson simpler in her habits, more easily served, than nine-tenths of the unfortunate, pretentious, badly educated fine ladies driven by adversity to earn their living, who swell the lists of the great incompetents. These ladies were very inferior to poor old Miss Rossiter, with her good music and her halting arithmetic. Yet Miss Rossiter had been a little hard to please as to the boiling of her egg for breakfast, and the shaking up of her feather bed. But if the new comer were like Jane, she would be simple enough in her tastes.

Jane Prior was utterly impervious to the light ridicule of Susie and the broader 'haw-haw' mockery of Lambert Crabtree, who heard their children conning their A, B, C to their rustic nurse, and jabbering the most frightfully illiterate French with Mrs. Crabtree's maid.

Innumerable letters were written from the

school-room at Redcot, over which Jane still presided, with regard to its future mistress. The most promising recent colleges for girls were applied to. Searching investigations were made into L.A. degrees, first and second classes, examination papers, testimonials—very different from the old courteous, kindly tributes to birth, character, and moderate attainments which were held amply sufficient in the dark ages. Usually when everything was weighed and sifted, there was some objection, some drawback, on one side or other. For not only is a *rara avis* difficult to find—the *avis*, in spite of Jane's insistence on the modesty of intellectual merit of the highest order, is apt to ask a unique nest in proportion to its own uniqueness. Several times the engagement was all but completed, and fell through, either from the stringency of Jane's demands as to the sum of learning on the part of the candidate, or from a corresponding rigidity on the other side with regard to the sum in coin of a salary

which John Prior did not see himself justifiable in making more than liberal.

Even Jane Prior's infinite capacity for taking pains was sorely tried, and showed signs of suddenly and ignominiously collapsing, when the right woman presented herself at the right time, as if by a special interposition of Providence. Jane heard of a Miss Gray, who, according to hearsay, was all Jane's fancy painted the perfect governess or schoolmistress, as the last development of the female teacher prefers to be called, returning proudly to the old unvarnished title. She had been trained in a college of preceptresses; she had passed more or less stiff examinations with credit, nay distinction; she had already gained some experience as a teacher, though she was not more than three-and-twenty—Jane's own age.

Miss Gray was vouched for as the daughter of a professional man of unexceptionable antecedents. She had been early left an orphan, with a patrimony that just sufficed to give her

an excellent education, consequently she had been brought up to maintain herself.

In spite of Jane's burning zeal for loftier attributes, she was not indifferent to the consideration of Miss Gray's birth and early associations. Jane Prior had at least her share of the prejudices, so called, of her class. 'Gray is a good name,' she said, dwelling on it with satisfaction, 'though, of course, there are Grays and Grays,' she wound up judicially, not pausing to explain whether the Gray which tended to whiteness or the other Gray, which, running down in the scale, bore on blackness, had to do with moral blamelessness and turpitude, or simply ranged from aristocratic to democratic proclivities.

Apparently nothing was lacking in Miss Gray, and, for a wonder, the conscientiously explicit statement with which Jane furnished her as to terms, privileges, and the duties of the post she was expected to fill at Redcot, also lacked nothing in her eyes. For that matter,

if Jane Prior had only known it, Miss Gray had set her heart on coming to Redcot even more than Jane had set hers on securing the phœnix. If it had not been for the shame of the thing and for exciting suspicion, the all-accomplished Miss Gray would have come without costing Mr. Prior a farthing of salary —nay, would have paid a premium for the coveted post.

Every preliminary was arranged, the day was fixed for the lady's arrival; the only thing that remained to be done was for Miss Prior to make use of the old phaeton, all that was left available of the Redcot carriages, to drive to Newton and meet the stranger at the station. Jane was punctilious in this piece of courtesy, though it cost her a whole afternoon of Plato's company. Mrs. Prior seldom went from home, and even when the social duties were less her daughter's particular business, Jane was tolerably well accustomed to act, with a wry or rueful face, as her mother's deputy. She was

determined Miss Gray should not find herself treated from the first otherwise than as a valued friend and guest of the family in which, it was to be hoped, she would dwell for a period of years.

The new comer was certainly in clover. The expectations entertained of her acquirements might be inordinately high ; the work required of her might be greatly in excess of what was necessary ; there might be imperative reasons for her being scholastically on her mettle. All the same, the days of her mourning as a governess who was systematically overlooked, or contemptuously hustled aside, or even rudely snubbed, were ended. Whether she fraternised with the unmarried daughter of the house, as Jane for one ardently desired, or not, Miss Gray might depend upon being received with the respect due to learning—to a competent instructress of youth. Jane would no more have thought of slighting her niece and nephews' governess, than an undergraduate,

however idle and thoughtless, would dream of openly insulting a college tutor.

Therefore, while fully measuring the wrong done to Plato, and the loss to herself, Jane found a severe satisfaction in making the sacrifice as complete as possible. She was at the Newton Station in such good time that she had to wait a quarter of an hour for the arrival of the train; but she did not spend the entire interval pacing the platform in solitude, except for the porters. Before the train was due Mrs. Crabtree appeared. Of course, she was known to the stationmaster—when it came to that, he knew the whole neighbourhood. But while Jane and he did not think it necessary to acknowledge their acquaintance by more than a slight bow on the one side and two fingers to the hat on the other, Susie had to interview the official graciously. She had to keep him standing talking to her in the dusk of the winter afternoon.

Susie put little pertinent inquiries as to the

amount of traffic on the line, interspersing them with small sympathetic regrets—amounting to exclamations of personal distress, ‘Mr. Panton, you don’t say so. Oh, dear, oh, dear! that is too bad,’ on the extent of his engagements. She dropped accidental references, which gave the impression that she knew all about his family and connections, and their various walks in life. She took one small delicately-gloved hand from her sealskin muff, and occasionally used it with the prettiest appropriate gesture. Without departing a hair’s breadth from her place, she shone in her beauty, her gentle breeding, and what he, like his betters, called her ‘smart clothes’ on the worthy man till she turned his head. He forgot to the last moment the obligations of his post. He had to run to set matters straight, and appease the just wrath of several commercial travellers, impatiently standing aside till he had done listening to the ‘soft sawder’ of Crabtree the banker’s genteel, handsome wife. This was

exactly the result Susie counted on and cared for.

Mrs. Crabtree was on the platform on some trifling pretexts of half expecting friends from London—these Miss Smiths who had disappointed her so often, and of wishing to give a note with her own hand to any messenger from Redcot who might be at the station. She protested she had not hoped to see her sister. ‘ You here, Jane ! ’ she exclaimed with quite a marked note of surprise, arching her fine eye-brows.

‘ Yes, where else should I be ? ’ demanded Jane, with a flavour of asperity in her tone, drawing down her straight light brown brows, in decided contrast to those of her sister.

These two were always in contrast. They had never understood each other or harmonised together. True, Susie had married while Jane was still a schoolgirl of fifteen—at the very time she took her first plunge into study, and was most engrossed by it. But from childhood

the sisters had not amalgamated or even bridged over the gulf between their natures and tastes. The pair had not quarrelled ; their interests had never clashed. The women had agreed to differ, but there had been little satisfaction in the near relationship.

‘ My mother, as you are aware, hardly ever drives to Redcot or anywhere else,’ Jane went on to say. ‘ My father only rides in on market days, when he does ride in. We were not going to let Miss Gray arrive without finding anybody to meet her.’

‘ I thought Richard would have come.’ Susie mentioned the old coachman blandly. ‘ I meant to have given him this note,’ producing a tiny cocked hat of paper ; ‘ but there is no need,’ tearing it to shreds and scattering them lightly. ‘ You can tell mam-ma that I am in despair because I have not found the cleaner’s address for her. I shall hunt all over the house, and perhaps I may be more fortunate.’ Then she added, with still more obliging alacrity, ‘ If you

had sent me word I should have been delighted to have come down and met Miss Gray in your place. It would have saved you a cold, dark drive.'

‘Thanks,’ said Jane, not very cordially. ‘I don’t know that it would quite have answered the purpose—even though you had happened to be here at any rate,’ she ended, with a slightly sarcastic emphasis. For both she and Susie were sensible the real motive of Mrs. Crabtree’s presence was that she might have the opportunity of satisfying her curiosity even about a person of no more consequence in her eyes than the little Woods’ governess.

Do not let any mistake arise. Susie would be thoroughly polite and kind, almost oppressively kind, to Miss Gray, but it would not be as Jane—notwithstanding her strain of formality and dryness—was friendly.

It was so late, the afternoon was getting so dusky, and the smoky lamps of Newton Station were so few and far between, that if Susie Crab-

tree's eyes had not been Argus-eyes, and her observation—as far as it went—quick, keen, and sure, she could have made very little of what she saw when the train came in. A figure in a hat and ulster alighting from a second-class carriage, was pounced on by Jane Prior as if by instinct, taken to the heap of luggage, and had her trunks, with one exception, committed to the care of the left-luggage man, to be called for by the cart from Redcot next day. Finally, Miss Gray was ushered into the Redcot phaeton, established in it, and driven off with the least possible delay, and the fewest words of introduction or leave-taking between the ladies.

Susie might have had her stroll to the station, and the spoiling of the pleasant dawdling over her afternoon tea for nothing, if she had not been able to use her eyes in the dark like a cat—a pleasing animal she resembled in several respects. But she was equal to the situation. She took a few mental notes with lightning

rapidity, she conned them, after she had seen the others start, while she was walking back through the quiet streets of the old-fashioned market town to the Bank House, with its peculiar importance and dignity, out of sight the best house in Newton ; Susie could not have imagined herself living in any other in the place. ‘She is not altogether Jane’s style,’ reflected Mrs Lambert Crabtree ; ‘she is not a fright either—anything rather than that ; quite a handsome, well-grown young woman in her way, though it is not a way that I admire. She has not the pre-occupied, independent, practically unsettled air which usually distinguishes these learned monsters and makes them detestable to men. I don’t think she is an oddity, and as a rule such women are oddities whom one can detect at a glance. She has not spectacles on her nose like Cornelia Blimber, and she is decently dressed—a plain ulster, but a good cut, and really a nice hat. I should not object to wear a hat like that any morning when

I was shopping. I wish Jane joy of her treasure. I should not be surprised if Jane got a surprise herself one of these days ;' and Susie laughed with a lively appreciation of the humour of the anticipated shock.

CHAPTER VI.

A SYREN ADVENTURESS.

IN the meantime Jane and Miss Gray were being whirled along the darkening roads with as much speed as an elderly horse and an elderly driver cared to accomplish.

‘I hope you will like Redcot, Miss Gray,’ Jane was overcoming her shyness to say cordially.

‘I am sure I shall,’ the stranger responded, with a fervour that might have startled Jane if she had been endowed with Susie’s gift of observation. The speaker’s ardour abashed herself, the moment the eager tone, which was the result of her repressed excitement, had slipped from her. She sought to remedy the

blunder by recurring at once to the object of her coming to Redcot.

‘I am afraid it is too late for me to see my little pupils to-night,’ she suggested ; ‘they will be in their nursery by this time.’

‘Well, their nurse has absurdly dogmatic, old-fashioned notions about their bedtime,’ said Jane. ‘I daresay she will be putting the children to bed before we reach home ; but they are often in the schoolroom till their supper hour. They are ridiculously slow in getting their lessons done, yet I don’t believe either Ally or the boys have bad abilities, while I have been anxious not to begin by shirking anything.’

Miss Gray was silent. There was even a little involuntary movement of her shoulders, which was more like protest than assent.

‘No doubt you will have a much better method,’ said Jane modestly. ‘You understand the science of teaching. You will remedy the defects of my system.’

‘I’ll do my best,’ said Miss Gray quietly; ‘but you must not expect too much from me. If I understand some of the theories and a little of the practice of teaching, you must know the children as no stranger can know them. Children are so different.’

‘Certainly, but you are not going to be a stranger, and all children with the average amount of brains can be taught a great deal when it is done systematically. The thing is for the pupils to acquire the habit of learning at every moment, at every pore,’ declared Jane, rising to the occasion, and speaking not only didactically, but with the enthusiasm which was generally held more in reserve with her.

Miss Gray did not go on contradicting one of her employers, the late directress-general of the little Woods’ studies. Perhaps the newcomer did not think that persisting in an attitude of opposition would be either wise or worth while. She had some experience of the relations in which she stood to the experi-

menter and the objects experimented upon, and she might look upon Jane's excellent sentiments pushed to extremity as a bushel of theory which an ounce of practice would reduce to its true proportions. Or she might be too much occupied looking about her to care to prolong a useless argument. She did show a commendable desire to become acquainted with her future surroundings. She peered through the darkness as the couple drove up the elm avenue. She paused a second looking up at the weather-stained house, and casting a rapid glance round the lawn and shrubbery lit up by the open hall door, as if she wished to take everything in before she entered.

Jane acted as a pioneer in conducting her companion through the labyrinths created by the superfluity of pillars and furniture in the hall ; took her past the ghastly Judas—ghastlier than ever in the lamplight—up the stairs, and decided that, as it was so late, it would be

better to show her at once to her room, and leave her to make whatever change of toilet was possible for her before dinner.

When Miss Prior was gone, Miss Gray rid herself of her encumbrances of hat and ulster. Then, though she had been told she had only a few moments to spare, she began to waste them scandalously for a person supposed to be endowed with the promptness and punctuality so desirable in a teacher of babes. She stood idly before the fire, busy only with her reflections.

Here was a better opportunity than Susie Crabtree had commanded at the station for seeing what the young woman, standing alone and off her guard, in the warm glow of the hearth, was like. In the first place, Miss Gray had not yellow hair, nor hair that by any stretch of imagination could be called golden, or even red; neither was it raven-black. Her eyes were not violet, neither were they of inscrutable darkness of hue. Her complexion

was not pink and white like daisies : far less was it colourless as marble or creamy as ivory. She was not divinely tall, or of a dainty smallness. Yet she was fair to see, notwithstanding these trying negatives and the other disheartening facts which have to be recorded. She was about the middle size. Her hair was simply a chestnut brown. Her eyes were nothing more than hazel. Her colour was of such a healthy depth as well as purity that it was in danger of getting too red, as on the present occasion, and spreading, as it had spread now, under the influence of the cold drive, and of the sudden transference to the genial warmth of the room, to the tip of her chin. This chin was itself a blemish in her face, for it was a little too square for beauty. But her teeth were white and regular. Her mouth was at once ripe, red, and clearly cut, as charming as that of a Norman peasant woman. Her nose was well shaped, and the brows above her hazel eyes were well marked, straighter than Susie Crab-

tree's, and more clearly defined than Jane Prior's.

Miss Gray did not look in the least like a Becky Sharp or a Lady Audley. She had all the appearance of a wholesome-hearted, sound, natural, English girl under her supposed load of learning, as happy as the deprivations of her orphan lot and the burden of her responsibilities would let her, probably more self-reliant and womanly, instead of girlish, than she would have been without the deprivations and the burden.

But contradictions will never cease. The fresh, honest, comely face was showing itself greatly excited in the shifting light. If anybody could have read Miss Gray's thoughts they would have seemed sufficiently mysterious for an innocent genuine individual in her circumstances. She was thinking, 'So I am actually here. I have succeeded in my enterprise—however much I may repent it. And that was Jane, while the other was Susie!

Strange, to meet them in flesh and blood, and they to regard me from a totally different stand-point without having the slightest suspicion why I should be deeply interested in them! Upon the whole, from the little I have seen of the sisters, I believe I shall prefer Jane; though Susie is wonderfully pretty, and I fancy *he* has a favour for her—I fear, I fear, on his weak side, poor fellow.' And Miss Gray shook her head wistfully, deprecatingly, with a kind of precocious womanly wisdom.

Miss Gray's train of thought was remarkable—out of a novel. It was decidedly unwarrantable—not to say objectionable—in a young woman who had not all the airs of a syren adventuress stealing into a guileless household and working incalculable havoc there.

She might have committed the further indiscretion of being late for dinner on her first evening, but she was interrupted in time. There was a tap at the door. When Miss

Gray opened it she found Mrs. Prior on the threshold. There was no mistaking the mistress of Redcot, though she had not waited for an introduction to the new inmate of her family, and she had just received from a servant a salver with wine and cake. She had overcome the reserve which was growing on her in order to supply what she guessed had been an overlook on Jane's part, though there was still a reflection of the reserve in Mrs. Prior's heightened colour, and the slight embarrassment in her air. But her old-fashioned dignity and politeness, mingling with the hospitality that caused her to serve the stranger herself, prevented the hostess from being really flurried.

‘I beg your pardon, Miss Gray, but my daughter ought to have seen that you had some refreshment as soon as you arrived, before you attempted to get ready for dinner. Don't trouble to make much change in your dress; we are old-fashioned country people,

and you must be tired after your long journey.'

Miss Gray had remained dumb in positive consternation. Something about Mrs. Prior and her entrance overwhelmed the girl. Her carnation colour deepened to crimson, and flooded her face and neck. She started forward with a little distressed cry. 'Oh! don't, Mrs. Prior, you are a great deal too good,' she exclaimed. She took the salver from Mrs. Prior's hands, set it down with trembling fingers, and stood like a delinquent with cast-down eyes, which, if they had been raised, would have been found suddenly brimming over with tears, before the simple, kindly, elderly lady.

Mrs. Prior in her turn was disturbed by the sensation she had created. In the later years of her life she had become accustomed to finding herself frequently called to account for not being on a level with a younger generation in knowledge of the world and its wickedness, and

of undreamt-of standards of propriety. She began to dread that she had committed a grave solecism in the trifling piece of attention she had paid Miss Gray, else she—Mrs. Prior—could not have so upset the new-comer, the fully-armed, all-accomplished young lady whom Jane had selected, who was to be Jane's friend. The offender could only take comfort in the consideration that the offence was a small matter after all. Then she fell back on the blamelessness of her motive, and recovered her equanimity as she withdrew.

But if Mrs. Prior recovered her equanimity, Miss Gray lost hers. She made a gesture the moment she was left by herself, as if she would have covered her face with her hands, and cried half aloud—‘Oh! I am afraid I have been very wrong. How shall I carry out my purpose—if I ought to carry it out and not relinquish it at the outset? To have Mrs. Prior—how sweet and dear she looks! I

don't wonder that he is very fond of her—wait on me in this character, is too dreadful.'

But youth is mercurial. Soon Miss Gray not only turned to her toilet, she bestowed on it an amount of anxious consideration which some people would have thought totally unworthy of a learned lady. In place of slipping out of one dress and into another with the celerity acquired by long practice, and scarcely a glance into the mirror, which was Jane's way, Miss Gray thought and hesitated. She opened her solitary trunk, and slowly took from it some trifles of gloves, shoes, and lace, then reluctantly shut it again, after she had indu'ged in one peep to see that no injury had been inflicted, in the packing, on the single gown it contained—a delicate expensive gown of palest, softest plush.

'I dare say Jane will be severely plain,' the stranger reflected, 'and her mother implied something very simple—such as might be supposed to suit a governess's purse—for me.

'This old black silk, which I have worn under my ulster, may do very well. It will be more in keeping. But, oh! I am so sick of black silks,' drawing down the corners of her mouth as she made the disparaging confession to herself, 'though I remember,' she thought again, with a shrug of the shoulders and a twinkle of the eye, 'I regarded this one, and that not so very long ago, such a desirable purchase—a most respectable best gown. But, if I could, I should so have liked to make a good impression on them the first night, as he would wish, if he knew.' The thinker drew a long sighing breath. 'I might have taken the bull—that is, the formidable old gentleman—by the horns and by storm. That is a horribly vain idea, above all when my blowsy charms are by no means out of the common. Still, I wish I could have worn my pretty gown to-night.

The would-be wearer put on a dressing jacket, and began to brush her hair pensively.

‘I believe she would have liked it. She looks so nice and sympathetic, I wish I could kiss her; but if she were to propose some day to kiss me I’m sure I should die of shame and contrition, though I never meant to harm her or hers.

‘I have had so few pretty gowns,’ the dreamer returned to her ground of complaint, and dwelt on it with a persistency that showed she was a woman and a girl still. ‘This is the very prettiest I have ever had, and, though I may have many more, they will never be like the first. It will lie and fade and soil, perhaps get old-fashioned as well as shabby before I have a chance of putting it on. Well, as if that signified. What a goose I am !’ She suddenly pulled herself up, and made a gallant stand against her folly.

The old, big dinner-bell—there had never been a gong at Redcot—pealed forth with a crack in its voice.

Miss Gray sallied out in her characteristic

black silk gown, in which, however, she looked bonnie enough, like a blushing June rose set among its dark leaves, and followed the servant sent to show her the way to the drawing-room. Miss Gray was introduced to the master of the house, who treated her as a gentleman treats a lady, but for anything further took very little notice of her, so that the trepidation with which she had been fencing, which she had been painfully keeping under strict control, might have been spared.

The dinner was quiet. Mr. Prior was taciturn, Jane was in one of her brown studies. Mrs. Prior had to make conversation on the weather, whether Miss Gray was fond of the country, whether she liked walking, &c., &c. The hostess had got so much out of the way of that particular service to society, in which she had never been a brilliant woman, in spite of her liveliness in private, that she did not play her part with great effect, and desisted from the effort as soon as she civilly could. She was

driven to regret that there was no diversion caused by the presence of the children at dessert.

When the ladies went to the drawing-room, Jane engaged Miss Gray over the programme of the children's lessons. Mr. Prior had his 'Quarterly,' Mrs. Prior her book. There was a little music, which was proposed as something more social and genial by Mrs. Prior. She contributed to it in the first place—playing an old-fashioned piece—not that she cared to play, or was very fond of music, but Jane was no musician, and Jane's mother had a fine sense that Miss Gray should not be allowed to feel as if her accomplishments were being trotted out. When Mrs. Prior left the piano, Miss Gray complied with the invitation to play and sing. She did both in a well-taught, decidedly pleasing manner, a little spoilt by nervousness. The performance was quite satisfactory, without being anything marvellous.

The servants came in to prayers, and the whole household retired early.

It was a somewhat bald realisation of a scene which had been anticipated often by one person present, and never without a thrill of emotion. But the veritable experience was not without its subtle interest for Miss Gray. She had directed many an intelligent glance to the objects around her—the icy mirrors, the side-tables with their gilt legs, the floral rug. She had watched covertly but breathlessly, as if with a kind of fascination, the unconscious, sombre figure of the master of the house, seated at his own little table, with his shaded lamp, restlessly fluttering the leaves of his magazine, and occasionally leaning back, and tapping with his paper-knife on the arm of his chair, not in time to the music, rather as if it were in an irritable accompaniment to his troubled thoughts. But, as so frequently happens, the interest felt by the looker-on was not exactly that which had been expected.

When Miss Gray was safe in her room again, she walked to her window and looked out on a bright moonlight night, which had succeeded the dark November day. ‘How peaceful and beautiful it is,’ the gazer considered. ‘It is charming; oh! dear, one could be so happy here, if everything else were as right as the dear old house.’

Then straightway Miss Gray resumed her former erratic line of meditation, with a renewal of the tendency to sum up the knowledge she had gained. ‘And this is Redcot! I am really here,’ she told herself in short, fragmentary ejaculations of wonder which could hardly believe itself, and was not unmixed with apprehension and repentance. ‘I declare,’ as she stared out, ‘that must be the mulberry tree under which the children kept house and played. I think I can catch a glimpse of the disused barn, where so many bats take refuge, while the owls affect the old mill. So that was the squire. He does look a little savage, but I should not have

thought him without natural affection—rather the reverse.'

She had become more composed, and took to pondering. 'Mr. Prior must have a lump of brain behind that big forehead—perhaps rather a conglomerate, heterogeneous lump. He ought to have a heart, however warped and soured, poor squire! which the twitching mouth obeys inadvertently. One sees where Jack has got the ugliness of which he is so humbly conscious, foolish boy! But he cannot be a bit like his father in other respects. Jack must be like his mother, dear soul! How prettily she played 'The light of other days.' Would she hate me if she knew it was I who sent him so far away from her when I did not know what else to do?

'I suppose that was one of Mrs. Prior's favourite stories she was reading. I longed to ask the name, but I durst not. The dog at her feet must have been "Tommy." I ventured to pat him, and was rewarded by a most diabolical

snarl, which seriously disturbed his mistress's composure. Well, Tommy has not the second sight, that's clear, else he might have detected a faint flavour of Jack, who was always good to him ; I'll vouch for that.

‘I've seen every one of them. I've only the children to be introduced to to-morrow. Will the grown-up people ever forgive me, and take kindly to me after this ? Even Jane I suspect has some class pride, though he had none, or else love slew and buried it clean out of sight the first day we met. But it is not as if I had entered another family in the neighbourhood. The children are poor Alice's daughter and sons, Jack's own niece and nephews.

‘Still, to come among them in a false character, I am afraid nothing can excuse that, though I have done it to judge for myself, and convince myself that there are more persons than one to blame. I did not need to come here to be convinced of that, but I wished to be prudent—to satisfy the few people who

really care whether I throw away my happiness and good fortune or not. I have to justify myself to dear old Mary, who was at my first college with me, and then we went to Germany, and came home together, and passed our examination on the very same day. I should not like, if I could help it, even to vex her father—kind, fussy Mr. Burton—who took me in charge before there was anything more than a hardy girl, who had been knocked about since she was a child, to take charge of. Anyhow, the thing is done and cannot be undone, without worse coming of it.' And with this half fatalistic and wholly soothing reflection, Miss Gray prepared to read her chapter, say her prayers, and go to sleep, with a conscience that was not so heavily laden as to keep her awake.

CHAPTER VII.

A TUG OF WAR AND A FLAG OF TRUCE.

WHEN Miss Gray got up next morning, she found her way to the schoolroom, and met not only her future pupils, but Miss Prior, at her former post, awaiting her successor.

Jane Prior always looked particularly well the first thing in the morning. Her style of dress, with its straight lines, comparative scantiness of detail, and absence of superfluity, while it was in danger of looking stiff and hard in a light evening gown, harmonised much better with the thick, dark woollen stuff or the plain uncompromising calico which was in use for morning wear in winter or in summer. All that was clear and open in her face seemed

to belong by right to the dawn of day. The searching light revealed nothing that was meant to be hidden away and cunningly concealed. All was frank and above-board, from the freckles on the broad forehead to the lock which, obeying a vagrant inclination known in local phrase as 'a cow-fleck,' would never comb smoothly back with the rest of Jane Prior's hair, but always kept springing forward and swinging across a corner of her forehead, disturbing the orderly arrangement of her head. As yet, there was not a faded hue or a haggard line in the face. Such would be long in stealing away the vigorous prime of an earnest, calm nature, strong in itself, amply supplied with interests which were largely impersonal, and with honourable work which was its own reward.

Miss Gray was clad fittingly in grey—one of the colours made for her. Competent critics on old masterpieces of art have often expressed the effect graphically. Grey toned down and

brought out her carnations in the most masterly manner. It is not every woman whom grey becomes, as it is not every woman who, even when young, looks well before breakfast. It is not a bad sign when she stands the last test. Miss Gray surmounted it as triumphantly as Jane Prior did. Jane was a fine-looking girl ; Miss Gray was more, she verged on a beautiful young woman. It was not merely her handsome features and rosy bloom which led to this conclusion ; her face was sweet with heart and bright with mind.

The three small Woods sat solemnly in a row at one of the desks in the old-fashioned, slightly-battered schoolroom. The children were like culprits about to be presented to their executioner. Yet they were neither badly endowed nor badly disposed. True, little Alice, all over pink in her confusion, was apt to be desperately engrossed with dolls. But lint-topped Tom was a boy of quite average understanding, as exhibited in his habits. He

had only to be taken and examined on the contents of the innumerable boxes—ranging from pill to band-boxes—which were the desire of his heart at the present stage of his existence. Any liberal-minded examiner would be satisfied with the result. In these boxes Tom bestowed shoals of extraordinary and improving curiosities in the shape of new farthings, old postage stamps, little stones, bits of wood of which the carving was very rude indeed, leaves of plants, dead or dying beetles and worms.

And anybody might have put dumpling-faced Sam through his ‘facings’ after he had trotted out surreptitiously and been brought back summarily from the offices, where he had been contemplating the cattle feeding or the horses airing, or even when he had been fired with noble emulation by the sight of the pantry-boy weeding the garden beds or cleaning the knives. It would have been impossible to detect in the small specimen of humanity any deficiency in that faculty of observation which

we are advised, on the authority of the greatest philosophers, to cultivate as a gift of primary importance.

Miss Gray shook hands with the children, and longed to say she would not eat them up, but refrained, out of consideration for what their Aunt Jane's feelings might be on the subject.

The children's copy-books, &c., were laid out for inspection, while the embryo scholars manifestly shook in their shoes before the verdict to be pronounced on their halting performance.

‘Everything does you all great credit,’ murmured Miss Gray, with a comprehensive wave of her hand and a comical glance at Jane Prior, which the giver of the glance hoped the rigid disciplinarian appreciated.

But some criticism was necessary, and the newcomer pounced upon Alice's signature.

‘Don't you think it might be a little more distinct, Ally? They call you Ally, don't

they?' The speaker added quickly—' Shall I write my name, and you can try to make it out?'

' Bennet Gray,' Jane read over the child's shoulder, with a little tone of surprise. ' I thought you were called Beatrice. You signed yourself "B. Gray," and I suppose I leapt to the conclusion that the B. stood for Beatrice.'

' No, for Bennet,' said the bearer of the name; ' I was christened Bennet after my mother and grandmother.'

' Is it a Christian name for women as well as a surname, in any part of England?'

' Yes, I believe so. I fancy it is a contraction for Benedicta, as Bennet is used for Benedict abroad. But the name is rather uncommon and conspicuous, serving to mark me out unduly. With the two exceptions I have mentioned, I have really never known another woman called Bennet. I dare say that is why I am inclined to feel bashful and stop short at B,' she said, laughing

and colouring. ‘That is a generalisation which, as you interpreted it, might stand for Beatrice, or Blanche, or Barbara, or Betty.’

‘We have a puppy—at least Tartar has, and its name is Benny,’ Sam’s treble voice broke in, without much relevance, and with an indecorous laugh. He drew down an indignant glance from Jane’s steel-blue eyes. Then the children hustled themselves down from their bench and disappeared in a twinkling.

‘Is this your old schoolroom?’ inquired Miss Gray, wistfully, as she looked round. There were discoloured maps on the walls, and chipped globes in one corner. The book-cases were full of shabby books, which had seen much wear and tear. There was the cottage piano with the yellowing keys, on which endless scales had been strummed, and poor Miss Rossiter had displayed her bravura execution to marvelling little musical aspirants. And there was the table in the middle of the room, round which short legs had dangled

from uneasy cane chairs, while chubby hands had been busy obliterating sums from maltreated slates, or scattering ink freely around as the stiff fingers, reluctantly obeying perplexed brains, travelled painfully across the pages of exercise books.

‘Would you mind telling me about it and letting me see where you sat and what you did?’ petitioned the new governess with something of a beseeching tone coming into her voice.

‘Oh, if you like,’ answered Jane, carelessly, but with a shade of surprise and discomfiture. The manner of the questioner was enough to suggest that she was but a tyro in her profession after all. If so, Jane had been singularly misled. ‘Yes, this was my old schoolroom, but I did not get much good here, though there was nobody to blame. There was nothing done here that could serve as a precedent or example.’

‘Was it only *your* schoolroom?’ persisted

Miss Gray, unaware of the impression she was producing.

‘No, of course not,’ answered Jane promptly. ‘Susie (Mrs. Crabtree) and Alice (the children’s mother), and even Jack (my brother), before he went to a boys’ school, were all taught here. Later Jack and I read here for a whole year with Mr. Conyngham.’ Jane brightened at the recollection. ‘That was better—I learned something then. I believe my mind began to open. Mr. Conyngham was quite an able man, I used to enjoy his explanations. I was so proud of his saying that it was a pleasure to make them to one who could follow him.’ Jane held up her head, and looked her best at the recollection. ‘I was fond of Greek from the first. It was all very nice, though, to be sure, there was the difficulty with Jack (my brother). He had some taste for mathematics, but he hated classics, which my father wished him to master. He used to sit there,’ pointing to a corner, ‘over his con-

struing, and when he was supposed to have been occupied with it for an hour, he would suddenly look up and ask Mr. Conyngham if he had read some story my mother had got from Mudie's, or if he did not think the weather fine for fishing ?'

‘ Oh ! ’ Miss Gray responded with a long-drawn breath to the account of the delinquencies of the young squire of Redcot, while her lips parted with a wavering smile, and her hazel eyes dwelt for a considerable space, as if they liked to rest on the particular corner. To be sure it was the corner on which the light came from the western window chequered by the bare boughs of a hedge maple that grew outside. It suggested vividly how the small leaves that would flutter in every breath of wind must make a rhythmic dance of light and shade on the faded carpet in summer. The same window commanded a side view, through the shrubbery, of the grey barn beloved of the bats, and the disused ivy-grown threshing-mill haunted by

the owls. It might have been remarked afterwards that Miss Gray always chose that corner, though it was the farthest from the fire, for her teacher's presidential chair.

After breakfast, Jane was once more aggrieved by the children's arriving for the duties of the day, cumbered with their own affairs. Tom had one of his boxes lined with turkey's feathers which he had picked up, Sam was panting to recount his encounter with the turkey which had shed the feathers, and Alice had taken it upon her to bring in the last of her dolls. That came of being too easy and familiar with the children.

‘Let them unload their burdened little bodies and minds,’ said Miss Gray. ‘It need not be altogether without profit, you know’—she added waggishly, not without a quick glance at Jane to see if the most distant approach to raillery might be allowable—‘admit information at every pore. Come, Tom and Sam, and tell me

all about the turkey and its wings, and whether calves and lambs have wings too.'

Tom and Sam shouted with derisive laughter over the idea, but were incited to listen when Miss Gray delivered the least pedantic of lectures which took only one minute in the delivery upon Alice's doll's eyes and ears and fingers and toes.

'But we'll not use such a liberty with your baby again, dear,' the lecturer promised the child. 'How would grown-up people like to have themselves or their babies treated as subjects for dissection?'

'She is not a baby,' objected Alice indignantly; 'she is Anna Maria Constance—a lady going to a ball. Don't you see her fan and her bouquet? I am to be dressed like that when I go out to India to papa.'

'I beg Anna Maria Constance's pardon,' said Miss Gray. 'But whether your doll is a baby or a lady she is for you to take care of, play with, and dress. She is not for another person

to dissect. Has she a great stock of clothes, Ally? I think I may be able to help you to make her something new. Ladies who go to balls, still more than babies in bibs and tuckers, are always wanting something new. I have a hat in my eye to be trimmed with one of Tom's turkey's feathers, if he will be generous and present one to Anna Maria Constance, which will just suit her.'

When lessons did come on, Jane had her reward at last. She had lingered, puzzled and on the verge of being vexed, for, in spite of her big brains, she was a woman slow to receive a new idea or to alter a foregone conclusion. But she admitted candidly, with honest satisfaction, that nothing could be better or more thorough than Miss Gray's mode of teaching. She had not been to the College of Preceptresses and passed her examinations in vain, and she was perfectly resolute in exacting all the children could give her. It was soon plain that, while she would not hear of long hours of lessons for such young

children, there would be as little as possible of shirking or trifling, where business was concerned, in her reign.

Jane Prior submitted to the new order of things, but not without a recoil. She was not arrogant or domineering by nature, and she had wisely determined to support Miss Gray's authority. At the same time Jane was tempted to suspect that Miss Gray might be very clever—that went without saying ; and might know her work—that was even more undeniable ; yet she was fond of theories, and liked short tasks and changes for herself as well as for the children. She rambled all over the place, and she found out the walks, even the winding path hidden among the tall shrubs to the rose garden—bare enough at this season—as if by intuition. It almost seemed as if she had known Redcot in a previous state of existence, and was delighted to get back to it and hail its familiar beauties.

Jane did not accuse her Admirable Crichton

of unfaithfulness to her post, only it was hard to find anybody, teachers included, faultless. Miss Prior was young, and had a craving after perfection—she felt a shade of disappointment. In place of approaching nearer to Miss Gray, the young lady drew slightly away from the schoolmistress, and engrossed herself with her own pursuits.

Then a special incident occurred in the family life. John Prior was summoned to be on the Grand Jury at the Winter Assize in the county town, and, whatever his pressing interests at home, he must fulfil his obligations to his fellow-subjects. The same thing had not happened for a period of years. The last time it had come about there had been an understanding that when next Mr. Prior was on the jury, Mrs. Prior, who even then visited rarely, should accompany her husband, and be the guest of some old friends while the Assize lasted. Much had altered since that arrangement was entered into; but John Prior had not forgotten it, and

his wife was touched and pleased by his remembrance. Altogether the two appeared to soften to each other, and come closer together on this small point. In the very details of their setting out—in her wish to drive with him on a doubtful day in the ramshackle phaeton instead of having a close carriage sent out from Newton for her private accommodation, in his anxiety about her wraps and parcels—Miss Gray, a keenly-interested onlooker, felt she got a passing glimpse through the man's gruffness and the woman's reserve of what the relations between them had been in happier years.

Jane Prior and Bennet Gray were left behind at Redcot to keep house, take care of the children, and follow their own devices.

Jane immediately improved the occasion by resolving to get through a large amount of 'stiff' reading which was on her mind. She had received a loan some time ago of several valuable and 'heavy' books, which ought to be returned on the first opportunity. She would

take advantage of her father and mother's absence, at a season when visitors were out of count in the country, to shut herself up and have a good time of hard study, such as she had not enjoyed for many months, and be able to send back the volumes in question without further delay.

Whether Jane had grown a little rusty in her enforced neglect of anything like tough reading; whether the old ethics were a more indigestible morsel than she had reckoned, she found at the end of the first day that if she were to do as she had planned she must husband every moment of her time. Never mind, she felt free to do it, now that Miss Gray had command of the children.

Jane Prior forthwith sent a polite message to Miss Gray, and begged that she would excuse her (Jane) from coming down to dinner. She desired Miss Gray to go on without her, and would she kindly send her up a bit of fish and a glass of toast and water—one of Jane's hobbies

was that study was best pursued on the lightest of diets—for she had to be very busy all the evening? As she was also to be very busy all the next morning, would Miss Gray not mind eating her breakfast, too, by herself? Jane was going to rise early and have her bread and milk when she got up. The two would meet at lunch.

It was not Bennet Gray's place to mind or to refuse to accept a civil excuse. However, when she encountered Jane in the course of the afternoon hurrying out of her room in her garden hat and over-shoes, with a generally distract air, just for five minutes of fresh air, as she rushed up and down the avenue, to keep herself from getting inconveniently sleepy later in the day, the young teacher stopped the young student with an eager appeal, 'I shall not detain you above one moment, Miss Prior; but is it worth while having all the ceremony and trouble of a late dinner for me?—unless, indeed,

dinner is a solemn institution which cannot be set aside.'

'But you must be fed, Miss Gray,' interposed Jane bluntly, and rather sharply, for she was provoked at being interrupted—every second was precious. 'I am not going to starve you because I do not choose to eat myself.'

'But it is not starving,' urged Bennet. 'I have been accustomed to dine early. I really eat my dinner at lunch time. Governesses are frequently expected to do that whether they like it or not; but I like it. Even if I did not, a bit of fish would suit me too, splendidly. I have often dined on less when I snatched a scrambling meal at a restaurant. All the time I was at Boughton,' naming her college, 'I breakfasted on bread and milk—and it did taste so good at half-past five.'

Jane was beguiled into listening with her interest attracted in a new direction—perhaps a more refreshing process on the whole than the five minutes' rush to the avenue.

‘I suppose that was where you were reading up for your examinations?’ she said, inquiringly.

‘Yes,’ said Miss Gray, ‘you know I had to crib the time for reading from every odd minute, and so had a friend of mine, since we were both teaching junior classes all the time. We had to reduce our nights to three or four hours. Mary Burton could stand it and keep awake, but I used to get so sleepy over my lexicon, and even during the lectures, I was ashamed of myself. Still it was jolly,’ with a sigh of remembrance over past pleasures.

‘What did you do to keep the sleep off?’ inquired Jane, from a selfish motive. ‘Come into my room for five minutes—I believe it is going to rain—and tell me all about it; what books you had to post yourself up in for your examinations, and how you came out of them.’

Bennet went into Jane’s room, simple and bare as that of an ascetic, for its mistress was

not one of the girl graduates who contrive to combine æsthetic fancies and sybarite indulgence with a passion for knowledge. She was in earnest in all she did. She had given her heart to the passion, and anything which interfered with it at this period of her life simply 'bothered' her, as she put it.

Bennet walked up to the bookcase and examined its contents with the intelligent relish of one who was something of a student on her own account, though the books were not those she had sought specially to master. On comparing notes, the two discovered that Jane's bent was more to philosophy, ancient and modern, and to natural science, while Miss Gray's was to history and literature in all ages. Jane was not altogether sorry, and Bennet positively rejoiced, though not for herself, that each evidently excelled the other in her own department.

In the excitement of the moment Jane confided to her companion that she (Jane) had

an ambition to go up to Oxford and pass an examination there, and Miss Gray reciprocated the confidence by an admission that she would like that very much for herself if the thing could be conveniently managed, of which Jane in her generosity had no doubt.

Thereupon the candidates for honours—such honours as they could win—settled the different subjects they would take, advised each other on the books they ought to consult, and became so friendly that at last the women in them fairly unbent. Inductive and deductive systems, postulates, cellular chords were gradually dropped, together with battles on Thracian and Etruscan plains, Courts of Areopagus, Conscript Fathers, odes, and orations. The citers of these formidable topics descended to gossiping and laughing about their several experiences, professors, and fellow-students. The speakers told with gusto of lucky hits and ludicrous mistakes, giving the slight but graphic local and personal touches that had reference to a

college hall or a savant's face, in which women excel.

These young women had not sport to diverge to, as two young men would have had in similar circumstances, though Miss Gray did try to edge in a word for lawn tennis, and, more extraordinary still, for dancing. Jane did not follow up these suggestions, but the couple had a taste in common for nature and for long walks, which did almost as well as boating, cricketing, or hunting, for a diversion from more serious subjects.

To begin with, and in the main, however, it was learning on which these girls, each with a good head of her own, fraternised. The medium has become possible in recent years, and it seems to serve as well on a pinch as ball dresses, choral practising, or district visiting.

The sympathy aroused was a pleasure to Bennet Gray for special reasons, but she had not been unaccustomed to such sympathy. With Jane Prior it was different. She had

been far more alone in tastes which were not shared by the women of her particular circle. She had not known such communion since she had left her school, or since the days when she had read along with Jack, and the teaching of the Cambridge coach had been a positive enchantment, under the influence of which her mind had brightened indescribably. She was ready to swear friendship with Miss Gray, to trust her implicitly, even though they should differ a little on the education of the children or on any other question that might crop up. She came near to forming a league with her on the spot, which was a long way for a woman of Jane Prior's temperament to go on so short an acquaintance.

For the rest of the time of Mr. and Mrs. Prior's absence, the ardent young souls agreed to set the forms of society at defiance, and enjoy themselves in their own way. They had no family breakfast, and no ceremonious dinner. They ate and drank such primitive fare as

bread and milk in their own rooms at unheard-of hours in the morning. The girls met and dined at luncheon, and consented to relax and refresh themselves—say with the wisdom of Socrates, or the quips of the ‘Birds’ of Aristophanes—over afternoon tea. These sources of relaxation on such lips did fit in queerly with the soulless splendour of the glassy mirrors, the gilt-legged tables, and the floral hearth-rug of the last Georgian and William era. The day was wound up with something equivalent to sporting oaks and solitary ‘sapping’ after slices of fish or wings of partridge, or something equally substantial.

The two delinquents kept their own counsel outside the house, but inside the cook and the housemaid were to be met and vanquished. These functionaries, with a greatness of soul which showed itself in utter indifference to the trouble they were spared, felt outraged by the unheard-of proceedings of ‘them unaccountable young ladies.’ They were not

exacting or hard or flighty or worse, and still they were no more like what young ladies were wont to be, and ought to be, than if they had been all that and a great deal more into the bargain. Yet, in spite of converting herself into a miserable book-worm, sitting up of nights and neglecting good victuals, Miss Prior was well enough to look at, though not to be mentioned in the same breath with beautiful Miss Susie that was, who had never been done with her gay doings. And as for that there governess young lady Miss Prior chose to make so much of, as was doubtless at the bottom of the mischief, since it belonged to her poor trade, she might have been a regular stunner, and turned the heads of half the gentlemen who came near her if she had liked, in place of frightening them away with her books. It was too bad, too bewildering and astounding to the oracles of the kitchen.

CHAPTER VIII.

AN OLD WOMAN'S FAVOUR.

WHEN the heads of the house resumed the reins at Redcot, the family fell back into its normal condition, even to the renewal of the alienation partially dissolved between John Prior and his wife. The couple slipped again sadly, but as it were inevitably into their former attitude. But the friendship between Jane Prior and Miss Gray continued. None rejoiced with greater sincerity at the alliance than did Mrs. Prior, though it shut her up still more to her book, her needlework, and Tommy—the old blue Skye terrier. She would look up with shining eyes at the two girls standing exchanging endless last words over

the fire or in the doorway. Miss Gray's heart ached for the woman left out in the cold—an experience which Mrs. Prior was too magnanimous and self-forgetful to resent for herself. Her own daughter was too well accustomed to it, too inobservant otherwise, too absorbed in the grand mental gains which lay before her—for intellectual ambition, no less than the pursuit of pleasure, has its unconscious devouring selfishness—to notice her mother's isolation.

Bennet Gray sought by the deepest, most well-laid strategy, to court the friendship of the mistress of the house. The enterprise was not easy, in spite of Mrs. Prior's gentleness—she was shy and proud and humble all in one. She could not help looking with distrustful eyes on the beautiful, clever young woman—solid enough to satisfy Jane, brilliant enough, even in the comparative shadow of her governess's position, to cause John Prior in his pre-occupation and discontent to look up and listen to her remarks with a gleam of entertainment. Why

should such an one come to Mrs. Prior? She had nothing to give beyond the courteous consideration she had never withheld in the old days from Miss Rossiter, and the admiration she had freely bestowed on this stranger. Miss Gray had a great deal that was worth having in life, probably about as much—seeing that the public estimate of a governess's career is undergoing a great change, and that she looked a reasonable, happy-tempered girl—as she cared for. Why need Miss Gray seek an increase of her well-being from Mrs. Prior, who was not herself so much at ease or so richly endowed, though she refused to complain, that she was qualified to shower benefits on all around her?

Mrs. Prior knew in the depth of her heart that for the present, at least, she had lost nearly all that she most prized which had once belonged to her, and, in the belonging, made her passing rich. Husband, daughters, even her son—her only son Jack—who had not grown away from her, was gone for the time

to the ends of the earth, across leagues of land and sea, into unknown regions, amidst undreamt-of dangers, and the wife and mother was angrily or calmly relegated to her books, her needlework, and Tommy! What had Mrs. Prior to give to Miss Gray? What had the elder woman to do comforting and petting the younger?

But one afternoon, after luncheon was over, Miss Gray, instead of retiring to the school-room or her own room and her learned associations like Jane, instead of setting out alone or with her friend on one of the long walks to which they were given, came creeping into the drawing-room with a pitiful story of bad tooth-ache, amply corroborated by heavy eyes and a flushed and swollen face. She begged a loan of one of Mrs. Prior's perennial stock of novels, to keep her from dwelling on the pain she was suffering.

The woman addressed felt at once the touch of nature which makes the whole world kin,

and responded readily to the human cry. ‘Oh ! poor thing ; I beg your pardon, Miss Gray, but I am so sorry. I need not speak of a dentist, for there is none nearer than Newton, to which you cannot go at a moment’s notice ; and at the best, the tender mercies of a dentist are cruel. The only thing to do is to keep yourself warm, and perhaps the pain will go of itself before morning. I am afraid your room is draughty, though I sent up a screen. Will you spend the afternoon with me ? That is a cosy corner opposite ; you can lean back in the low chair, and you may drop off into a nice sleep. I shall not speak a word to disturb you.’

‘You are too good,’ protested the patient, willingly consenting to be installed into the comfortable chair on the other side of the hearth. ‘But I am not so ill as that comes to. If you will let me come across to your book-case for anything you can spare, I am quite able to read, and forget the ache of the tooth in that way.’

‘ You are perfectly welcome,’ said Mrs. Prior, simply but more formally; ‘ only I am afraid there is nothing you will care for.’

‘ Not care!—I! ’ exclaimed Bennet in such an energetic disclaimer that she forgot her ailment, and started up bolt upright from her half-reclining posture, ‘ when I read the names of William Black’s last novel, and Mrs. Oliphant’s second last, as Miss Prior was taking the books from the book-box, and I have been dying to get a look at them ever since.’

‘ Dear me, Miss Gray, do you care for novels?’ cried Mrs. Prior, opening her eyes.

‘ Care! ’ reiterated Bennet, ‘ I should think so. Care for “Adam Bede,” and “Mary Barton,” and “Westward-Ho,” and “Nicholas Nickleby,” and “The Virginians,” and “Pride and Prejudice,” and “Waverley.” I have sat up till two in the morning, and what is more, I have risen at six to read some of them. Why, Mrs. Prior, if you will forgive me for asking, what do you take me for? ’

‘I don’t know,’ answered the elder woman with a little blush and laugh, more gratified than disconcerted. ‘None of my children except Jack, who ought to have been better employed —everybody said—cared much for novels. Poor Alice married out of the schoolroom, I may say; Susie went a great deal out into company; and Jane is far beyond novels. I thought you were like Jane.’

‘I am supposed to go in for history,’ said Miss Gray, in an easy colloquial strain, which was enough to show that one pupil from the college of preceptresses wore her learning lightly, let us say nothing about gracefully. ‘Did you never hear what was said by Lord Holland—was it Lord Holland or Sir Robert Walpole?—anyhow, it was a great statesman, when somebody proposed to read history to him on his death-bed? His answer was to the effect that he was sick of lies, let them read poetry to him. He might as well have said novels—good novels.’

‘Well, I was brought up on Walter Scott

and Jane Austen, and I don't think there is much falsehood in them,' corroborated Mrs. Prior, with a deep sigh of satisfaction; 'and I have got many a glimpse of real life that I should otherwise have missed—even out of authors little known and soon forgotten. When the children were young and my health was delicate I visited little—hardly more than I do now. Without novels I should have had small chance of change of scene and company. I was not strong enough, even if I had got the brains, to cope with heavier books; and, though travels might have given me change of scene, and biography introduced me to one other person and his immediate set, I should still have wanted the constant succession of fresh company. Mr. Prior was fond of travels, but he liked novels too in those days, and would read one out for half an evening, when I sat at work.' Her voice fell as she revived the peaceful picture, and she quickly obliterated it by another reminiscence. 'I have read not only "*Evelina*," and

“Cecilia,” but the whole five volumes of “Camilla,”’ she announced with innocent pride. ‘It was a favourite book of my mother’s, and she used to quote it to me. I have read the original “Sir Charles Grandison” and “Clarissa,” with a little skipping. I have even dipped into an odd volume of the “Fool of Quality.”

‘Oh ! Mrs. Prior, say no more ; your novel lore is stupendous,’ cried Bennet. And then, in spite of her toothache, the two fell to comparing notes on the couple’s favourite stories and what were the tit-bits. The young woman and the old crossed the Rubicon by the bridge of romance, just as Jane and Bennet had passed it with the help of philosophy and the classics.

The confabulation was renewed from day to day, when fresh volumes were exchanged. ‘What is she doing now ?’ Mrs. Prior would be heard to inquire breathlessly with regard to a new and refractory heroine, into whose entrancing history Miss Gray, with her young eyes, had got before her fellow-reader by several chapters.

‘Well, she has gone and misunderstood Sir Harry for the fourth time. I have no patience with her.’

‘But Sir Harry is trying, you’ll admit that,’ remonstrated the most generous of critics.

‘Oh yes, he is the most trying hero I ever encountered. But that is no reason why she should take to philandering with the curate. I like that curate, though, immensely. The fact is, I’m deeply in love with him myself. If I had been Dorothy I’m sure I should have thrown over Sir Harry and married the Rev. Giles’s flat feet and gawky laugh. I should have done it just because of the afternoon when he was caught sliding on the pond with all the bad boys in the parish. I should have sought to make up to him for the disgrace he got into when he sent the tickets for groceries and coals to the dreadful old pauper who shut the door in his face and his vicar’s, and called names to them over the window.’

‘But you could not have been allowed to throw over poor Sir Harry, and you would certainly not have got the Rev. Giles,’ objected the reader of long experience. ‘He is reserved for reforming the Hon. Mary, who cares only for what is beautiful and graceful, and is so vindictive that she has kept up a silly school-girl feud with a lady who has become her sister-in-law.’

The chat grew more and more a matter of course, until Mrs. Prior’s tongue would wag the faster of the two. It was a winning tongue, that could express thick-coming fancies, quick turns of thought, even merry jests—all dashed with the latent enthusiasm which was so strong a feature in the woman, though the tongue shrank into silence before a little coolness, harshness, rudeness.

‘You have got into my mother’s good graces,’ said Jane Prior to Miss Gray, without a particle of jealousy. ‘I heard her talking quite gaily to-day as she has not talked since that unsatis-

factory brother of mine bade us good-bye before he took a trip to Australia.'

John Prior coming in unexpectedly, and hearing his wife's voice, so often quiet of late, raised in tones of interest and animation, turned and looked in wonder, which was in danger of becoming offence in the mood that had become chronic with him. And immediately the speaker did him the further wrong of appearing caught and put out.

At last Bennet ventured to ask to see Mrs. Prior's needlework, and Mrs. Prior did not mind showing it to her. The mistress of Redcot explained that she had been engaged for a number of years on quilts for each of her children. She worked slowly, but she hoped to finish before her eyes failed her. 'The work is old-fashioned and of no account compared to the fine artistic embroidery we see nowadays,' she said, in her modest, deprecating way; 'but, apart from the value, I think the children may like to have it one day,' she explained, and

there was a soft, far-away look in her eyes which did not leave it doubtful as to what change of circumstances the 'one day' referred. 'And after the children,' she added cheerfully, 'I daresay Ally and Molly and the boys will not object to having some remembrance of their granny if only to prove that her stupid old fingers were not always idle, though she read novels by the hundred, and sermons by the score.'

'And sometimes found the novel the better sermon of the two,' put in Bennet.

'Sometimes,' admitted Mrs. Prior, 'but each is good in its own way.'

The work was minute and elaborate. There was neither bold drawing, nor striking effect, nor learned conventionality. There was a nearer, though still a distant, approach to exquisiteness of detail, marred by a certain timidity and hesitation belonging to deficient artistic knowledge and training and to comparative ignorance, both with regard to the result to be

arrived at, and the limit of what could be attained with the materials employed.

The first impression the interminable work gave was that adopted by Jane Prior—it was a tremendous waste of time in a hurried and crowded age. The next that might occur to a sympathetic soul was a sense of the infinite tender pains which had been taken, until the pains were reflected in the work, and lent a grace to it, like the glory dimly shining from ancient stained glass that only exists in tiniest fragments, which have been fitted together with the most loving, unwearied care.

But to see the quilts as Mrs. Prior saw them and yet was aware that none save one person had ever caught a glimpse of them would have been to have borrowed her imagination. It had enabled her to smell the scent of the hyacinths she was embroidering, and to see in the purple vetch and the pink and brown fumitory, not the poor shadow of the homely weeds, but the shady lanes and the sandy fields round

her father's house, where she had made her first unapproachable child's posy.

‘Oh, I know there is nothing to be seen,’ cried Mrs. Prior, with a despairing sense that there was nobody there, save herself, with eyes to see anything in her labour of love, except poor, pottering work. ‘I know that even I could make a great deal more of poppies or foxgloves, for instance, than of those small obscure things—too insignificant for art to borrow. But I have a great liking for them, I daresay because they have been seldom copied, and so the most faulty copies bring back the originals more vividly to my mind. I am aware that an artist with her needle can cause a single sunflower or a spray of clematis to be a thousand times more imposing and picturesque, with a thousand times less trouble, than all my heap of trivialities.’

‘I like your flowers best, Mrs. Prior,’ said Miss Gray emphatically.

‘It is very good of you to say so,’ said the

complimented worker, shaking her head. ‘ But I am not so conceited as to think my work is at all admirable in that sense, or what many people would care for. However, it has been a pleasure as well as an occupation to me, and seems somehow part of myself; no doubt because it has engaged me so long, and it has been my own idea—let it be ever so clumsy or feeble—and so has expressed something in me. And, do you know, my son likes it?’ she broke off, and looked up with her face lit up brightly. ‘ He has insisted on gathering all the flowers that I have worked for his quilt, and he says that he sees the dew on the May and the bees on the broom still,’ declared Mrs. Prior, with sparkling eyes. ‘ I suppose he inherits the foolish notion from me.’

‘ Yes,’ chimed in Bennet Gray, eagerly, ‘ and when spring and summer have come again, will you, Mrs. Prior, oh! will you let me bring in from my walks any little flower that does not grow quite at hand? I should be so

proud and pleased if you would allow me to help you in that way. I can sew—indeed I can—and I can embroider decently, I am fond of such work; but my work is not like this—nothing can ever be like this, which must be all your own. I understand perfectly I should never presume,' faltering in her excitement, 'to have any share in this beyond bringing you the more out-of-the-way flowers. Will you let me?'

'Thank you very much,' said Mrs. Prior gratefully, but a good deal puzzled by her companion's extraordinary zeal; 'I am exceedingly obliged—yes, for the other quilts. I am glad you like them. Jane thinks them a great waste of time, and I was afraid you might do the same. You see I work at them by turns, and for the other quilts I shall be very much pleased if you can bring me what is a little difficult to find just when it is wanted. Let me see, there is brooklime, or you may call it water forget-me-not. I have none of that, and I

should be thankful for a few stalks of grass of Parnassus and some sprigs of the milkwort that used to grow on Kershaw Moor.'

Miss Gray promised willingly to get what was required at the fitting season. But she was half-amused, half-piqued by the quiet reservation which had been made. 'Yes; for the other quilts'—not for the one which was intended for Jack Prior. She was not to be permitted so much as to gather a flower for that. It was half-comical, half-pathetic.

CHAPTER IX.

TOMMY'S NEW FRIEND.

THE outworks of Mrs. Prior's heart were stormed successfully by a younger woman, who had thought it worth while to make the attack. Then she proceeded to lay siege to what lay nearer the citadel.

Mrs. Prior was—as everybody in the household, from her husband to the last pert table-maid was ready to protest—a slave to that horrid old dog, Tommy.

Tommy had seen his day, when he was neither a nuisance nor a burden, but an agreeable, helpful companion. That day was past. His old friends had mostly grown away from him, while he was slipping back into that second

childhood which is not particularly graceful either in man or beast, and demands forbearance—sacrifice from the young to the old, as in former days the same quality was required from the old to the young. Tommy's attractions were bygone and forgotten ; his friends of other times had lost sight of the old Tommy and become weary of his successor's dulness and infirmity. Even Jack Prior, who had never spoken an unkind word to an animal in his life, had ceased to ask for the dog's company.

But Mrs. Prior, who never wearied of anything or anybody, and never forgot where she had once loved, continued staunch and faithful to Tommy, all the more so because others were unfaithful. For the most part she did not see in him the unwieldy, sluggish, snappish brute he appeared to most people, but the gambol-some, good-humoured wisp of grey and black hair all quivering with his passion for exercise and with devotion to his masters and mistresses that he had once been. She felt hurt surprise

that so many persons could change to such an extent in their tastes and likings. For her eyes were opened perforce to see that Tommy was in the way. It was a bore to take him for a walk and find that he had grown stupid, and would no longer keep to heel, but strayed and lost himself, and came back limping and panting. It was a hardship to wash him when he struggled, splashed the washer, and showed his few teeth. His begging was no longer a pretty accomplishment, but an intrusive piece of greedy importunity. His warlike or joyous barking—a performance to which he had been at one time encouraged—which had, indeed, been regarded as a brave or gleeful sound when everybody was young and cheerful and not afflicted with irritable nerves—had now become an intolerable trial which the tortured ear could not be expected to bear. His snoring, which had been looked upon as so funny long ago, was a still direr offence. His scratching, which that earlier world had carelessly or magnani-

iously overlooked, had waxed horribly suggestive.

Then Mrs. Prior's heart grew sore. Her sense of justice was outraged. How could Tommy know that there was such an alteration in the sentiments of his judges, and why was he to be punished for their fickleness and peevishness? Her tenderness was wounded. The very things which rendered Tommy no longer acceptable to his other cronies appealed irresistibly to her generosity and softness of heart. The blue glassiness creeping over the bright brown eyes, the stiffening of the once active limbs, the thinning and straightening of the erewhile profuse wavy hair, the white appearing round the mouth and about the ears, like the grey in an old man's beard and on his temples — to think that anybody could cease to care for a dog, even a dog, could begin to dislike, to covertly neglect, to be harsh to him in such circumstances!

There might be another reason for the ab-

surd sensitiveness which Mrs. Prior testified where Tommy's honour and happiness were concerned, that caused her to watch jealously over his rights, and actually made her resent a slight and injury to him, though she would pass over, as not deserving a thought, the neglect of her own claims. She seemed to recognise a certain similarity between her position and that of Tommy. She was not without a sorrowful fellow-feeling where he was concerned. Bennet Gray could catch words and sentences of long, one-sided conversations which Tommy's mistress held with him when they were alone. She would remind him of a hundred pleasant old haunts, games, family festivals the two had shared. 'Do you remember the rabbits in Redcot quarry, and the rats in the barn, Tommy? Have you forgotten that morning when you brought papa's slippers to him all of your own accord? Surely you can recall the day when you leapt out of the window after you had been shut into the schoolroom to keep

you from following little Jack when he was going off to school for the first time? And do not say you have lost sight of the evenings when I showed the girls how to dress you up for their charades? Ah! you are wagging your tail—it is not such a brush now as it once was—but you have not forgotten.' Did the woman who thought so much of the past, which other people had left behind, deceive herself for a moment into fancying that the dog took part in the retrospection? Anyhow, she would beg him to live till their Jack—hers and his—came home again, and then they would give him a hearty welcome.

There was no serious difficulty in addressing one's self to Tommy after the introduction had been fairly given. He waited cautiously for that formula; when it had been complied with he was apt to be overwhelmingly affable. He greeted all his friends with loud acclaim every time they crossed his path after the briefest absence. Unfortunately the acclaim had come

to be regarded as uncalled-for, uproarious, and aggressive, and was frequently met by indignant rebuffs, 'Get away, brute.' 'Do be quiet, and lie down, Tommy.' 'Oh, you tiresome little wretch, can you not hold your tongue? Just look what you've done to my velvet and fur.' The last outcry was from Susie, whose universal pleasantness was not equal to the derangement of the grace of her entrance, and the onslaught on her elegant clothes. Mrs. Prior would wince at the protests as if they had been uttered against herself, would entice Tommy back to his comfortable corner, and secretly pat him to make up for that sudden collapse in his elated bearing which proved the repulse had somehow reached a vulnerable spot in his canine heart. 'You only wanted to tell them you were glad they had come back, poor old 'Tommy! But they don't care for your gladness, my dog. I should not waste it upon them, if I were you. But then you are only a foolish dog, and so are magnanimous, while

you don't quite understand. Never mind, you are your old mistress's pet: come and welcome her, and she will not drive you off.'

There was another person who did not drive Tommy off, to the vague surprise of everybody, Mrs. Prior included. Miss Gray, that charming, reasonable, highly-informed young woman, instructress of youth, and friend of Jane Prior, displayed—not nervous terror, which some learned and clever people, otherwise invulnerable, have betrayed with regard to dogs and cats—but childish exultation when Tommy condescended to put her down on his list of friends, and began to persecute her with his attentions. 'Tommy has run to the drawing-room door to meet me—he has, indeed.' 'He has leaped up almost to the crown of my head.' 'Look—look—he is pulling me in by the hem of my gown, the kind darling. He will take a long walk with me next,' she told everybody who would listen to her. She applauded his begging

more ecstatically than Mrs. Prior herself commended his extraordinary feats in this respect; for Tommy could still sit up for five minutes at a time, as if he had swallowed a ramrod, looking more like the British Grenadier than the genuine article looked. Miss Gray was constantly caught surreptitiously rewarding the performance with choice morsels from her plate.

Tommy was in the habit of exhibiting other engaging attributes in which, to tell the truth, there was more of childlike confidence in his friends' indulgence than of doglike humility, or of a modest, retiring disposition. He would plant his two shaggy front paws one on each foot of a shivering individual toasting his or her toes on the fender. He would look up with calm affectionate assurance amounting to sublime nonchalance in the writhing face of the unfortunate sufferer—of whose crushed toes, Tommy, with his by no means light weight, was ruthlessly making a

soft cushion for the sensitive soles of his own paws. At another time he would have a cunning eye to the footstool with which some luxurious creature was supplementing his or her general well-being. He would pertinaciously watch his opportunity, never forgetting the main chance, for a period of hours. He would deliberately insinuate first one paw and then another on the coveted stool, and try, by an insidious appeal to human feelings, or by bodily pressure in a slow, shoving process, to remove the owner's feet, and to establish in their place his fat body. At last, if the grudged possessor of the bone of contention unwarily rose for a second, then, quick as thought, the last remnant of Tommy's alertness was displayed in seizing on the goal of his ambition, which was frequently far too small for his requirements. He had to poise himself upon it uneasily, with all his superfluous bulk quivering for lack of sufficient support, or to stretch

himself with his head hanging overboard—so that the blood ought to have rushed to his obstinate head—while his hind legs dangled helplessly in the opposite direction.

Miss Gray could never see that these were scandalous liberties on Tommy's part. She laughed till the tears came into her eyes, she endured without a murmur—even proudly welcomed excruciating torture when her feet happened to be those on which Tommy threw his solid weight in improvising cushions upon the fender. She promptly resigned her foot-stool for his use, as if she was only too happy to serve him. She might have been a child with her first pet. Jane, who had her own inclination to hero-worship, and had begun to worship Miss Gray, was forced to own to herself that her new friend, with her natural endowments and college training, could be positively silly on some points—to wit, her behaviour to dogs. It was a proof of that want of absolute perfection in anybody, even

in a scholarly woman, which Jane detected with regret. But one thing was certain, and it was a comfort to know it—Miss Gray was not at all in the position of an old cowed dependent and toast-eater, who was lamentably deficient in the attainments she professed to impart, and so was forced to ingratiate herself with the very animals of the family. Bennet Gray was a highly-gifted, elaborately-equipped young woman, independent and responsible in her calling, with an acknowledged position and rights which nobody would dream of invading. Times have changed for the better with the Bennet Grays of society, even within the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Miss Gray's *penchant* for Tommy, like her great liking for Tommy's mistress, was gratuitous and beyond suspicion.

If the saying, 'Love me, love my dog,' contains any truth, there is a corresponding saying at least as influential in some instances

—‘Love my dog, and I’ll love you.’ Mrs. Prior and Bennet Gray had arrived at such an advanced stage of friendship that the former would, without being asked or led up to the subject, begin three out of every four of their conversations with the prelude—‘Miss Gray, you have heard of my son who has taken a voyage to Australia? Poor boy! he is far from home and among novel surroundings, but I am sure he has not forgotten his mother.’ Then would follow an anecdote of Jack’s youth or maturity. There was an exhaustless stock of similar stories, extending from his childhood, through his school-days, to his present manhood. The tales were an excuse for long lists of his good qualities, tastes, and habits. Neither were the visions which had once been entertained of his future entirely left out. A gallant fight was made for them, though there were signs that the old dreams were fading under the burden of disappointment, doubt, and apprehension, which even the

fondest and most faithful heart could not refuse to own.

Miss Gray listened with endless patience, nay, with keenest interest in the shining eyes, which she instinctively cast down, so tell-tale was their light.

These confidences were a strong indication of Mrs. Prior's deepening regard for her young ally. They were also some relief to the elder woman, since the young man's name was rarely mentioned in his family. John Prior had turned against his son, and Jane had gone with her father in the dispute. As for Susie and Lambert Crabtree, they were like Gallio ; they cared for none of these things. It would not matter to them though her father quarrelled with Jack beyond the possibility of reconciliation. The estate of Redcot was entailed on male heirs, and there was no likelihood of the entails being broken. For anything farther the Priors—father and son—could manage their own affairs, including the discord between

them. It was, strictly speaking, no business of the Crabtrees', especially as Susie had not the slightest intention of quarrelling with either of the disputants. She would show the world that she could be on good terms with both. Did she not like to stand well with everybody?

One day a letter came to Mrs. Prior from her son, full of all the colonial wonders and news about himself which he thought would interest her.

The letter arrived with the morning's post, and Mr. Prior took it out of the bag at breakfast time. He knew the handwriting before he glanced at the post mark, and he handed the letter to his wife without remark. But his wide nostrils involuntarily expanded and contracted, there was a nervous twitch of his full under-lip, and the furrow between his shaggy, straggling brows was ploughed still deeper.

Mrs. Prior coloured up with mingled pleasure and indignation, and put the letter

in her pocket without tearing open the envelope.

‘She cannot open it before me,’ John Prior said to himself; ‘she has not the face to do it. It contains too much that is not fit to be read in my presence. Her precious son is asking her for money or abusing us all round, and her face would betray her. She could not suppress that evidence.’

‘I will not read it before him,’ Mrs. Prior told herself as she drank her tea with her hand shaking so much that she could hardly hold the cup. ‘His own father! and not to ask if the boy is well, or if he writes of coming home—as if he had done anything really wrong—as if he had been a scapegrace like Ned Owen! Jack was only not very diligent over his books and a little extravagant. It was pardonable enough in a lad—hundreds at Oxford do the same. It is too bad in his father.’

Neither did Jane Prior put any question.

She did care to hear what her brother was doing, though not to a tithe of the extent that his mother cared. But she was silent on principle, as Jane did many things that had, perhaps, better been trusted to the impulse of the moment than to principle.

Mrs. Prior was not naturally a taciturn woman; she had womanly reserve and prudence, but sympathy was also very dear to her. When it was denied to her from legitimate sources, she was fain to quench her thirst at the irregular spring which had sprung up for her in the desert of her life.

The next time she caught Bennet Gray alone, Mrs. Prior, as if to indemnify herself for the privation she was subjected to, and to revenge herself on those who ought to have cared, and did not care, to hear her letter, poured forth her information. She boasted with innocent mother-boasting of Jack's exploits. He had been at one of the diggings. He had spent three days in the bush camping

out. He had seen no end of opossums. His correspondent enlarged with quickly-roused admiration upon his sensible views and judicious intentions.

Miss Gray was a good listener here also, and did not fail to satisfy the eager speaker. But when Bennet was shut into her room she covered her face with her hands to hide her scarlet cheeks. 'I could beat myself,' she groaned, 'I feel such a hypocrite. What will she think when she knows? Will even Jack be able to forgive me when it all comes to his ears? Shall I ever forgive myself?'

Then she drew from her pocket a thick letter and slit open an outer envelope. The letter enclosed was marvellously like that from which she had just heard various details. Indeed, the cleverest expert would have been puzzled to detect a difference in the handwriting, and the Sydney postmark was the same, though Miss Gray's letter had come to her under an English cover, addressed by a

woman's hand, and bearing the stamp of one of the midland towns.

Bennet pored over the pages, and seemed to forget her contrition to the extent of being disgracefully triumphant, because they contained projects revealed to her alone.

‘He does not tell his mother of his inquiries into the price of land and of his going to see different lots, or of his reckoning as to how fast a log house could be run up. What would she say if she were told that it was I who sent her son so far away from her and everybody !’ Miss Gray rose in her excitement, and began to walk up and down the room, and to speak half-aloud, as if she were pleading her cause against an invisible accuser. ‘Oh ! dear Mrs. Prior, I could not help it. There was no other way then. I was forced to see, for his sake as well as my own, whether he was in earnest, whether he could give up things—his friends among them. I had not learned to know you, and I did not wish to go where I should never

be wanted, and to take what would always be grudged to me. Besides, I saw enough and heard enough, from himself, to be aware that he had other friends—companions rather, idle, rich, and inconsiderate—not generous like him, who were no good, and among whom he would never do good. I had to make myself certain that he could renounce his past, begin anew, and live and work in earnest for himself and me. There was no other way then ; it would have been our only chance, and I had to put it before him, because, though I was no older, I had known another side of life. I seemed called on to decide for both.'

She sat down again and studied the letter once more, giving herself up to happier ideas.

‘There is no need now, dear, rash, impulsive Jack,’ she told another than Mrs. Prior in accents of exultation instead of pleading, ‘for exile and toil, on borrowed money too—none in the world, thank God for it, for your sake,

and mine, and hers ; and oh ! surely some day for your poor father's.'

There was no end to the reflections which that letter produced. The next thing Miss Gray did was to take a packet of thin paper from her desk and contemplate it lovingly—deprecatingly.

' I shall have to answer as soon as possible, of course, and what a letter I have got to write now that I have received an address ! You have been better off than I in that respect, sir. You had Mary Burton's address to write to in case I quitted Berkshire. That quitting was rather different from anything we had thought of. It was sudden, but it was not at all disagreeable. I had the luxury of the best cab from the station all to myself. I could take my entire luggage, and I had no trouble either about the weight or anything else, for not only was I a first-class passenger, Mr. Joliffe, good man ! though he had sometimes treated me cavalierly enough, insisted on being at the

station to see me off, as if I could no longer take care of myself. I wonder if anybody ever had half so much to say before in a letter as I have to write to Jack,' speculated Miss Gray, leaning forward on her crossed arms, and not knowing where to begin, from sheer *embarras de richesses*. 'He will be surprised until he has no surprise left to feel, though the sky were to topple over on his head. It will be so strange for him to know that I am here, and so curious for him to read my first impressions and he far away, if he is not angry with me for coming. But he can see that when Jane's letter of inquiry was forwarded to me, the temptation was irresistible, especially when I had nothing else to do, and when I owed something to myself and to the friends I had,' she meditated pensively, and raising her head with a little air of pride, 'I mean I was bound to satisfy Mary Burton and her father, that my first step was not to throw myself and all the rest of it away without making a single investi-

gation. So much for your not having been always the wisest of men, poor, dear Jack,' she broke off with a rueful shake of the head; ' and for exposing yourself to the necessity of probation by way of punishment. But you were good, true-hearted, uncalculating,' she told herself more warmly than ever, ' when you gave me as manly and honest a heart as ever beat. Your mother and I know what it is, and that it could never have led you far astray. You may think, and be quite wrong, that I have never trusted you—that I have stolen a march upon you—and you may be, perhaps, a little vexed and annoyed; but still, because of the other glad news—the clearing away of all our difficulties, the joy that is coming to us—you will condone my worst offences, Jack. You will set sail with the next ship; the long, weary way and the sea, where there are storms and wrecks, will soon be passed, and you will be at home with your mother and me.'

Unquestionably Bennet Gray's private cogi-

tations bore an alarming resemblance to those of the syren adventureuses of fiction, of whom we wot. But these alluring heroines have not, as a rule, passed through colleges of preceptresses, surmounted stiff examinations, and aspired to university honours. They have in general been the offspring of purported credulous advertisements, or replies to the same in Metropolitan newspapers, and of a confiding willingness to dispense with all references. Neither have the enchantresses been distinguished, as a rule, by their respectful affection for elderly ladies, and foolish fondness for superannuated dogs.

In the end, of the two letters which were all that went from Redcot, addressed to Jack Prior, entrusted to the mercies of the next colonial mail, the one was written by his mother and the other by his sister. Jane thawed enough to be induced to ascertain where Jack was and what he was doing, as a prelude to sending him—not all the news of

the neighbourhood—her mother would do that, but a slightly high and dry, though not unkind, missive. Strange to say, Miss Gray did not address a letter to any man—Jack among them. She was not guilty of more than sending what the ‘Polite Letter-writer’ would have called ‘a copious epistle,’ to judge from its bulk, doubtless containing a score of profound maxims and a host of learned saws, to her friend,

‘Miss BURTON,

Girls’ Grammar School,

W—,

S—shire.

CHAPTER X.

SPRING OBLIGATIONS AT KERSHAW.

THE arrangement which had domesticated Miss Gray at Redcot continued to work admirably. The children got on well with her, and were fond of her. Jane enjoyed the stimulus given by the neighbourhood of a kindred spirit, while the two girls studied late and early in the half sublime folly of youth, which is grandly spendthrift of health and strength till the day of reckoning is forced upon the prodigal. Each pursued her own course of reading for the Oxford examination, comparing notes constantly on the progress the other made, and feeling spurred on by the comparison to attack with spirit a new authority.

Mrs. Prior liked to hear how busy the young people were, and to see how well and happy they looked in their abundance of work. In her secret mind she thought it was that which was really of consequence, and that it did not matter half so much what was the nature of the work—so that it was honest—whether it was shell grottos, or paper flowers, or ancient philosophy. Everything had its place and served its purpose in the great, wonderful, complicated economy of the world. There was a day for small things, as well as a day for great, and the first was not to be despised any more than the last was to be depreciated. She believed there was use for her quilts, while she greatly admired and respected the cleverness and depth of the new generation. She could hardly find words strong enough to express her satisfaction with Miss Gray—such a scholar, so unaffected, unassuming, kind-hearted, so wise with the children, so companionable for Jane, so little in Mr. Prior's way, giving no more trouble than she

could help to the servants, such a dear young friend for Mrs. Prior herself!

Even John Prior, though he took much less notice of Bennet than the other members of the family did, liked her and considered her, if such an addition to the establishment was necessary, in the light of an acquisition rather than a detriment. Miss Gray was a little despairing sometimes of her relations to the master of the house. She feared that after all her vain dreams she had made no way with him at all. But she was partly mistaken.

Susie Crabtree was gracious and caressing to the Redcot children's governess every time the two women encountered each other. At the same time the popular matron tried to get as much out of the teacher as she could conveniently extract, in the shape of useful hints about lesson books and modes of employing them for the future benefit of Molly and Piers.

Lambert Crabtree stared Bennet Gray out of countenance with his great prominent light

eyes, as he was in the habit of staring handsome young women down. He cried, 'Hey ! Miss Gray, ain't you sick of grammars and spelling-books, and of little sinners wading through them ? Now, how many times have you boxed the small Woods' ears to-day ? Tell me honestly,' and sought to make game of her rather more rudely than he aimed at taking off the rest of his world.

Both husband and wife were profuse in their attentions, such as they were, to Bennet Gray, whom that hair-brained enthusiast and learned goose Jane had taken up to such an extent. She had established Miss Gray at Redcot as if she were on a perfect equality with her employers, and it was a great favour on her part to come and stay with them, and receive her board and pocket her salary for being not a quarter of the day in the schoolroom, giving a few elementary lessons to the little Woods, and for anything more, fooling Jane to the top of her bent. But, of course, Jane would resent

furiously any interference with her paragon, any attempt however desirable and gone about with the greatest delicacy, to put her in her proper place. It would be better if it were even in old Rossiter's place. Mam-ma, who deferred absurdly to Jane, had always been weak in her treatment of subordinates. Susie would not for the world be hard upon them—on the contrary she would load them with kindness, but it should always be kindness from the mistress of the house to the retainer. Mrs. Crabtree, in spite of her good-nature, disapproved entirely of professing to make the governess 'one of the family'—which could never be, having her to dinner as well as to luncheon, giving her the run of the drawing-room when she was not professionally engaged in the schoolroom—her proper place, and so spoiling her for her line in life.

Both of the Crabtrees—Lambert, in his off-hand fashion ; Susie, in her sugared sharpness—spoke disparagingly of Miss Gray behind her

back between themselves, and that all the more because of Jane Prior's championship. Husband and wife arrived on different grounds at the same conclusion. They considered Miss Gray, whom Mrs. Prior described as unaffected and unassuming, very much of a humbug, and decidedly pretentious for her circumstances. But the Crabtrees did not go out of their way to speak evil of their neighbours : so much might be said for the couple. His *rôle* was that of a hail-fellow-well-met with everybody. She was too busy with her own concerns not to forget those of her fellow-creatures who did not cross her path. In that case her instinct was to cajole, and, if possible, win them over, never roundly to abuse them.

Time was passing ; the winter had done its worst, and was going—well-nigh gone. The landmark of Christmas, kept very quietly at Redcot, was well rounded, and even February had waned. What poets and moralists call the harbingers of spring had been seen and heard.

Snowdrops, yellow balls of aconite, pale buds of primroses, shrivelling up at their own audacity, had begun to show themselves on the flowerless earth. The catkins of the hazel and poplar had been before the primroses. Slender, erect twigs of snowberry bushes were forming miniature groves all by themselves, and vieing with the thick drooping branches of the tall larch trees, in bursting into vivid green. Sanguine crowing young cocks of blackbirds were singing down the faithful robins that had piped out the shortest day.

The transformation had begun in Redcot Quarry, to which John Prior still stalked, stumbling a little over the stones as the season wore on, and the protracted trial was telling on his bodily strength. He continued to go doggedly and by stealth to his post on the chill afternoons, at the period of the year when all the brightness departs with the morning, and the afternoon brings at best leaden clouds and cold winds. Notwithstanding that spring was

yet early, and four o'clock saw the sun far on the decline, there was a swelling of sap-laden purple boughs and of down-tipped, glossy, brown buds. An ethereal powdering of green began to appear on all sides. There were stirrings and movings of reawakening plant and animal life eager to be free, exultant that the dispensation of death was ended and the resurrection at the door. It was already a time of vague, sweet promise, which mocked a hopeless man.

The most stay-at-home persons, who had hugged the winter as an excuse for remaining largely by the hearth, were impelled to speak of extending short, uncomfortable constitutional walks into long, voluntary, enjoyable rambles. People were called on to think of excursions and projects that had to do with the out-of-door world, which had been laid aside and metaphorically wrapped in cotton wool, while November hid his poverty and rags in a succession of white mists, and December and January alter-

nately dripped in sullen tear-drops which did not even glitter in the gloom, or froze in fierce, black frosts, that held the world in an iron grip.

Redcot had its obligations in the fine weather, and Jane.Prior had her share in these obligations. They were not necessarily confined to society in its ordinary claims. Neither was Jane selfish in her personal tastes. She would willingly have elevated the whole human race along with herself in her striving after higher issues. She did what she could. She was continually lending instructive 'papers' and books to the young house and table maids, even to the elderly cook. There would be the difficulty to get the recipients of these loans, without flat tyranny, to read enlightened explanations of how beds should be made and wineglasses dried. Camilla and Clara had quite enough of their work when they had done it. They desired other recreation than was to be found in reading about it at every spare moment. Miss Prior should try how she would like if she were

not allowed to get a change, but had to consent to mattresses and washleathers being for ever poked at her and dangled before her eyes? Servants had a literature of their own, which was not dry and sermonising and tied down to service. On the contrary, the reading in Camilla's and Clara's weekly newspaper was highly imaginative. It transported the readers to a charmed region, in which they were not doomed to herd with fellow-servants alone, though they were worth a deal more than their mistresses guessed. In such literature servants could mix with grand ladies, to whom Miss Prior, with her crony the governess, could not hold the candle, and there were fine lords to match the ladies.

As for Martha, the cook, she vowed that if she sent up her roast joints and rabbit pies, and cabinet puddings, to please the master and mistress, she was not going to be worried by none of Miss Jane's printed fads about baking stealing the taste from a thing, and

boiling being taken at the minute, and stewing having become a lost art. Lost indeed! as if she could not stew with an onion as well as any woman in her own Buckinghamshire. Had Miss Jane or her friends who printed cookery ever tried their hands at boiling or stewing? Well, till they did, they had better let a proper cook as knew her business alone.

Jane attacked the coachman and the gardener, but they were equally wedded to their ways, and unapproachable on the scores of driving and gardening.

‘Father,’ said Jane, one evening at dinner, ‘what about the sanitation in the pits?’

Now, as it happened, John Prior had come home that afternoon in deep depression, condemned to judge from the movements of the borers that the Kershaw pits and all connected with them were doomed. The sanitation, as Jane called it, would be of small account then. The question was decidedly ill-timed.

‘Sanitation,’ he drawled, as if a half-awake stupidity and absence of mind contended with his testiness. ‘Sanitation,’ he repeated, pausing upon the term as if he had never heard it before, and was chewing it previous to digesting it; ‘what do you mean by sanitation?’

‘Oh, you know; the health condition of the pits,’ explained Jane, staring.

‘Well, as I keep an agent, who is supposed to have learnt his trade, and as it is a matter of certainty that, if he and I fail, the Government inspector will be down upon us, I don’t think you need trouble your head about that,’ said Mr. Prior in weary sardonicalness. He added to himself, as he looked into his hock glass, ‘You may soon have more to do. I hope your lexicon and theses will put bread into your mouth.’

‘What made me inquire,’ persisted Jane, in her calm, judicial voice, utterly ignoring her mother’s warning glance, ‘was that I heard

there was a good deal of typhoid fever at Kershaw last winter.'

'Have you only found that out at this date?' was her father's retort.

'Why, Jane, did you not hear,' her mother interposed, 'that the doctor at the works sent us word, and Martha prepared quantities of kitchen stuff? I don't think we have sent such supplies to the Colliers' Rows since the dreadful explosion in 1867, before you can recollect.'

Jane sat convicted of not having been quite aware either of what took place at the pits or of what was going on in the house. She was not to be let off with this exposure of her weak points. 'Before you unhesitatingly associate typhoid fever with pit sanitation, as you call it,' remarked John Prior with a parting snarl at the word, 'you had better make yourself acquainted with the habits of the miners, the quantity and quality of their food and drink, for instance, the manner in which they manage to shirk the regulations against over-crowding

their houses with lodgers, and introducing as many bull-dog puppies as infants into the rooms, before you throw all the blame on the unlucky coal-owners. One would think that a little *esprit de corps* might come in and help to keep the balance level.'

'I am sorry if I have appeared to reflect upon your arrangements, father,' said Jane, who had really a great respect for her father, and was not beyond making reparation for a supposed wrong done to him. At the same time she was not going to give up her principles. 'If the miners are more glutinous and drunken than other working men, if they live more like brutes, with their amusements lower and more degrading than other men's amusements, and if this has been true for centuries, I am afraid the proprietors have something to answer for. They may not have meant to wrong the men. The masters may not always have known better in the past, or been able to do better themselves. Still, I cannot see how they can have

been without fault,' said Jane, with an earnest desire to be fair.

Mr. Prior did not reply; he was sick of the subject. To twit a man with the sins of the coal-owners when he was on the verge of having no coal to own was worse than useless—it was the irony of fate. If he had ever been a passive instrument in suffering a great industry to grow without a corresponding provision for the wants and temptations of the labourers in that industry, retribution had come in the shape of the withdrawal of the power, and there was an end of it.

Jane's next philanthropic movement was to offer, with Miss Gray's concurrence—now that the weather was better, but before it had got so fine as to suggest unlimited football and cricket matches for the lads in the afternoons and evenings—to drive over twice a week to the colliery village of Kershaw on the moor, to help the Rector with his classes. The Rev. Herbert Haynes had exerted himself to open a

kind of rough club-room for collier lads, with classes for such of them as had any open or smothered wish to improve themselves. But Mr. Haynes was getting up in years, and had a delicate wife, with neither son nor daughter at home. He had many irons in the fire, and he feared he must relinquish this particular iron from incapacity either to wield it regularly himself or to provide an available substitute in his absence. Then Miss Prior came to his aid and offered to go over regularly to Kershaw and teach any branch within her range. She was fired by the idea of hungry aspirants for knowledge being turned away empty from the inexhaustible stores.

Jane could not have done the thing by herself, but Miss Gray was there to keep her company. In addition, Mr. Haynes's parish clerk, who was the secretary of the club, could play the part of one of the stewards at a ball —a sort of male chaperon, and help the young ladies to keep order among the somewhat

difficult audience. Finally, Mr. Haynes would look in as often as he could to make the matter still simpler and more practicable.

Mr. and Mrs. Prior did not make any objection, even although the old phaeton had to take the road twice a week, and Jane and Miss Gray had to be absent from dinner on these occasions. John Prior was not a full-blown tyrant. There had been a time in his life when he might not only have been amused by the Amazonian enterprise, he might have applauded it heartily. His reign was all but over ; it was as well that it should close with a feminine flourish of fifes rather than of trumpets. He only reserved to himself the right of growling and grumbling at the small inconveniences to which he nevertheless submitted.

CHAPTER XI.

AMATEUR LECTURERS.

THE girls did not tire soon of their self-imposed task—when it came to that, one of them was not an amateur ; and if the Board schoolmaster was placed *hors de combat* by professional scruples and professional fatigue, the same reservation might have applied equally to Bennet Gray. But Bennet had an excellent gift of being interested in everything, especially everything that had to do with Redcot. She extended her interest to the grimy coal-pits—the gaunt shears and piston, with their relentless iron clang and rattle—the boilers ostentatiously puffing steam from their safety-valves. She cared to see the ugly rows of colliers' houses,

which, in spite of the good wages said to be spent in them, could not escape a chronic sordidness. She wished to walk on the bleak moor, with even its sandy vegetation blackened and blighted, trodden down and strewn with cinders, encumbered by heaps of rubbish, intersected with rusty dwarf railways for waggons, threaded with a wasteful multitude of footpaths for many a yard round the pit mouth.

Bennet did not shrink from the burly, round-shouldered men in blue flannels, with the whites of the eyes and what of the skin was not coated with coal-dust acquiring a ghastly and demoniacal prominence—an effect increased by the red glimmer of the lamps in the caps. She listened breathlessly to the tales of subterranean life, with its dreary hardships and awful dangers. She stood and tried to realise to herself how the scene must have looked on the occasion of the great fire-damp explosion. A roar and a rumble as of thunder,

and a shaking of the earth beneath the feet, a cloud of smoke and dust rising from the pit, a frantic whirling round of the pit gear, followed by a sudden standstill of the machinery as when a clock or a watch that has been recklessly wound up in the agitation of the moment, snaps and stops ominously in the chamber of death. Bennet could almost fancy she heard the rush to the cottage doors, the sobbing wail of women's voices taken up and prolonged, the wildly irregular, feeble patter of the feet of the wives and mothers, hurrying deliriously beyond their strength to know the worst of the tragedy.

The experiment in which Jane Prior and Miss Gray took part was fairly successful. The half-grown lads, however uncouth and unruly to their schoolmaster, did not refuse to be amenable to the daughter of the owner of the pits and the other fine young madam, whom at the same time her pupils addressed, in an unvarnished fashion that ought to have

done good to the hearts of reformers in education, as 'Schoolmistress.' The drawback was the dense atmosphere of bashfulness that surrounded the scholars. In vain Jane Prior spread out her geographical maps and hung up her physiological diagrams, and gave admirably succinct yet comprehensive explanations. They were nought against the intangible barrier.

Miss Gray followed suit with further lectures, not quite so clear and cuttingly concise perhaps, but in some respects more interesting in their picturesque discursiveness. Neither did she break through the thick mist of clumsy self-consciousness, overpowering false shame, and abject dread of ridicule.

If the courageous young lecturers dreamed of anything in the nature of an observation, whether acquiescent or dissentient, from the rude human material they had to work upon, any faintest ghost of a question or an objection to indicate that the audience heard or attended

to the words spoken, then the rash dreamers found themselves very much mistaken.

The girls were considerably daunted by their failure to elicit a spark from the cold iron on which they hammered with all their might. At last it struck Bennet, who was the more original, the more visited by inspiration of the two, to appeal to individual curiosity, 'Have none of you relations abroad that you would like to hear about?' she asked anxiously.

A slight sensation followed the speech. One youth was more moved than the rest. Possibly the renown of spiritualism with grotesque variations had travelled even to Kershaw Moor, and a display of it was expected, enough to provoke any amount of nudges and grins, for there was no lack of hard-headedness among the sons of the soil.

With a convulsion of the shoulders—already brawny and already bowed—and a contortion of his face, Jim Ashe gave utterance to an admission in a sepulchral whisper that he had an

uncle and cousins in Ameriky. Barty Noakes, yonder, had brothers in New Zealand; Bill Tummas, he weren't sure, for it were afore his day, that his mother—as had married again a sodger, hadn't gone with the regiment to Roosia, where the wars was, and stayed there after her second man was killed.

‘Well, wouldn’t you like to hear what the places are like where your friends are? then those at home can understand better any letters that come, and have a more correct guess what the absent people are doing,’ suggested Bennet, insinuatingly.

There were one or two slow nods and well-nigh inaudible ‘Ay, surelys’ to the teachers, as well as sundry nudges—approving, critical, or derisive—among the taught, in reply to this offer, and Jane and Bennet threw themselves once more into the undertaking, and renewed their expositions with fresh zest.

The thin wedge was inserted. The big boys were roused to care a little for what they

were hearing—to forget who were speaking, and even who were listening. Somebody was induced to come up and look at the spot on the map that all the talking was about, and three or four others, with shuffling feet, crowded after their companion, sheeplike, to gain the same advantage.

Some other body cried, half under his breath, 'By Golly!' when he heard of the virgin corn, the wild turkeys, the sheep runs, the cherries which grow stone outwards. It was not an elegant expression, it had even a flavour of profanity, but there was a certain satisfaction in it, as showing pleased wonder in place of stolid indifference.

Matters progressed till Jim Ashe was not above rehearsing the number of his bones, and candidly confessing he never knowed he had such a many or such heaps of sinews—for all the world like sticks strung up in a faggot. And Bill Tummas was brought to believe by the aid of the glasses in a telescope that he saw

with the back of his eyes as well as with the front—in fact, it was the picture on the back that did it.

Then all at once the lecturers made an astounding discovery. There was one phlegmatic young miner who had listened to everything and said nothing, that knew all about it beforehand. He was as full-fledged an impostor as any prisoner in jail who is a dexterous penman, but gets rid of some of the tedium of his incarceration and curries favour with the chaplain by the rogue's putting his tongue in his cheek, and beguiling the worthy man to toil on in the pleasing delusion that he is inducting a promising scholar into the mystery of pot-hooks. This collier of the future happened to have brains—he could read, he had devoured all the printed matter he could come across, and having once had the chance to break his leg in the discharge of his duties, and to be supported at Mr. Prior's expense for seven or eight weeks, he had even enjoyed a little leisure for the improvement of

his mind. As he was regarded somewhat in the light of a monster and a deserter from the traditions of his class by his companions, he might be forgiven for hiding his talent in a napkin. His betrayal was purely accidental. Miss Gray had let her thoughts get entangled in the net-work of veins and arteries on the diagram before her, and was on the point of tripping, when she was caught up from an unexpected quarter. ‘Nay, schoolmistress,’ burst out the pedant, ‘T’ blude runs t’other way.’

It was as when Brutus spoke with the voice of a man. Jane, who had little or no sense of humour, simply stared. Bennet tittered in a spasmodic effort to restrain a peal of laughter. ‘Hear till him !’ cried the rest of the class excitedly ; ‘ hear till Noah King having the imperence to fault schoolmistress—set him up ! Though he do know a thing or two, he’s none such a scholard as that comes to. Turn him out ! turn him out !’

‘But he is right, and I am wrong,’ cried Bennet, in horror lest condign punishment should be inflicted on the modern Galileo before her face. ‘It is I and not he who deserve to be punished, only I’m sure you’ll excuse a slip of the tongue, and let me say that I’m exceedingly obliged to Noah King for correcting my mistake. He does credit to his teacher,’ she added enviously, with a recollection of the next to futile labours of the last few weeks.

Jane had recovered herself. She had a turn for organising and economising power. ‘Noah King,’ she said, ‘you take the foot of the class, and if nobody else can answer, you put what you know into your own words, and it will save us from saying it over again.’ The device answered, and the station allotted to Noah forbade jealousy.

The class increased instead of diminishing, and admission to it was actually coveted. In proof of it, the first lad who had spoken out to the ladies, confided to them that he knew of

another chap who would come to the club-room if he knew what to do with his ‘babby’ in his absence. He was a young widower, who had neither mother nor sister, while his late wife had come from a distance, and had no relations in the place. He lived alone, save for the child, in a cottage a quarter of a mile off. He was accustomed to bring the child every morning, and leave it for the hours he was in the pit with one of the women in the nearest row. But he took the ‘babby’ home with him, and if he came to the class, which was not held in a house in one of the rows, but in a building fitted up for the purpose, standing midway between the Rectory and the works, he would either have to lock up the child alone in the cottage, or to walk a considerable distance out of his way—both coming and going—to fetch the little girl to and from the particular row. ‘Joe thinks,’ his ambassador ventured to propose, ‘that if he were let bring the babby here, as is a good wench going three, he could keep her main

quiet, for she would sleep like a top the most of the time.'

It was a puzzling proposal for those who were cultivating popularity, and aiming hard at giving satisfaction. 'I think I know who "Joe" is,' said Jane Prior, aside in consultation. 'He is not much older than the rest, though he has been married and has a baby. Mr. Haynes spoke of him at the time the lad's wife—the merest girl—died. My brother used to know the husband, and have him to go with him, Jack, across the moor to shoot snipes and plovers. The collier boy was acquainted with all the birds' haunts, though it might not have been wise to encourage the acquaintance. Some of the colliers are the most desperate poachers in this part of the country. They have cost my father no end of trouble as a landlord and Justice of the Peace.'

'Do they poach on Mr. Prior's land?'

'No; but it was not pleasant to have his own men brought up before him and his fellow-

Justices. He could not help saying a word in the culprit's favour, because of the relations between them, which made them look to him to help them, though he threatened every time he would never do it again. However, I dare-say you have learned by this time my father's bark is worse than his bite. Another thing, he was alive to the deprivations of the men in their underground life.'

'No doubt your brother would use the same argument in taking this Joe to shoot with him,' said Miss Gray, a little formally and stupidly.

'No,' said Jane, with a droop of the corners of her mouth. 'My brother would not want an argument if he liked the lad, and he had a fancy for him. Jack—my brother—went down the pits in the same cage, and he believed that once when his inexperience brought him into some kind of danger Joe Jones's presence of mind and fidelity to his charge saved him from the painful consequences.'

‘Don’t you think we might have the child?’ Bennet began to plead, pressing her hands together with nervous eagerness, according to a trick she had. ‘If we refused, it would seem so disobliging and unrelaxing, and make such a bad impression. Surely among so many grown-up people the little thing might be nursed, sat upon, suppressed. Certainly it is not good for her to be out late, but I am afraid that must often happen. Think of a little child like that having nobody to care for her save her father, and he quite a young fellow! ’

Joe Jones, a thin pale-faced lad—preternaturally thoughtful and careworn, was suffered to bring his child—sickly, and ill got-up in its faded cotton frock and an old washed-out shawl of its mother’s. It was withheld from screaming, but seemed always on the brink of the performance, as it sat up with wide open blinking eyes, which it refused to close, even for the forty winks granted to its elders. Joe was distressed, and everybody else was on the alert and dis-

tracted from the business of the hour. Miss Prior looked put out. The elderly parish clerk, who was a bachelor, and had never approved of the incongruous introduction of that young fool Joe Jones's bantling, appeared still more shaken. More than one of the remaining occupants of the room showed symptoms of recantation and secession, and of a mean triumph in the flooring of their teachers.

Bennet Gray asked if the child might be tried with her. She could speak with it in her lap when her turn came, if her hearers would not mind. She thought she could put the baby girl to sleep.

Joe, who was a modest lad, still more sobered down by circumstances, felt horrified at the trouble he was causing, and reluctantly consented to impose his burden, which was, nevertheless, precious to him, upon another.

Bennet was awkward, to begin with, in the task she had undertaken. She had not been

accustomed to very young children. But she acted upon her womanly instincts. She cuddled up the creature in her arms, and bent her lovely, kind face over it. The shriek with which small Nancy Jones was about to testify her violent dislike to being transferred from her father's arms to those of a stranger died away on the child's lips. Her round eyes opened yet wider at the new face presented to them; her mouth formed itself into a 'three-cornered smile of bliss,' while the crystal tears were still hanging on her eye-lashes. She consented to look at the glorious, glittering, yellow face of Bennet's watch, produced for the little woman's edification, and to hearken to the 'tick, tick' of the extraordinary thing. She leant back, overcome by the combination of marvels, took to meditating upon them, while she sucked her thumb *à la* Molly Crabtree, and in five minutes was fast asleep.

'Weel done, schoolmistress,' grunted one of

the lads who had watched the feat, and his unvarnished applause met with a general echo. The supremacy of the promoters of the higher education of mining youth was re-established on a firmer basis than before.

CHAPTER XII.

VISITORS—MAT CRABTREE, OF HAYBRIDGE, REMEMBERS A BERKSHIRE MISS GRAY.

SUSIE CRABTREE, who liked to have a finger in every pie, contrived to look in on these evening classes at Kershaw. She came by herself just for a few minutes, to see what was going on. She won her way out to dinner at a neighbouring country house, where she would leave Lambert Crabtree to play cards till the small hours, and sleep till his horse should arrive in time to take him back for a meeting of the bank partners. Such irregularities in his habits were not unusual in the Newton banker, who was supposed to have picked them up in his jovial bachelor days. Mrs. Crabtree had earned

a reputation for true womanly wisdom in not coming down too hard on practices which she could not pluck up in a day, if they were ever to be thoroughly eradicated. That pretty little fine lady, who had an agreeable word for everybody, and was not above claiming a neighbour's help, and taking a tribute of homage from him —whoever he might be, knew what she was about. Yes, indeed, she knew a great deal better than your puritanically plain, tremendously sensible, and overpoweringly good madam, who would drive a man to distraction by the height of her virtue, and her rigorous out-and-out obedience to its demands.

Mrs. Crabtree threw off her fur cloak as she entered the young colliers' class-room, and beamed on the Calibans within, in what was to them the splendour of her lace gown, with the square bodice cut low in front to show the dazzle of her ivory-white neck, and the sleeves only coming to the elbows, leaving the round arms free except for the coils of bracelets. She

wore strings of soft gleaming pearls in her hair and round her throat, and had pearls and rubies to match and relieve each other at her wrists and in the rings on her fingers.

The lads sat more open-eyed and open-mouthed than Nancy Jones, as the vision flashed upon them. Some of them smiled sillily, as when a dog licks his lips and wags his tail at a treasure utterly beyond his reach. One or two —among them the heavy lad who knew the machinery of his body, gloomed sulkily, and after the first broad stare looked another way. They would have said, if they could—“We won’t stand being mocked. We are beginning to know whose sweat pays for all these grand rags, oyster spawn, bits of red glass, and all ; who has to be content with bare bread, or to be grudged beefsteaks and pots of porter when we are dizzy with the darkness and faint with the foul air of the pits, and our arms fall to our sides with the weariness of hewing, while you strut and sail in your bravery, for which

you never worked a hand's turn. But why bring it here to sicken and madden us with the sight, when some of your kind were doing a poor bit of good, and almost tempting us to believe you cared for raising us to your level, and making us men and not simply beasts of burden, drudges, and slaves ? '

There were fierce rising democrats and demagogues among the young bears of the Kershaw pits, as among the young bears elsewhere throughout the country.

Lecturers and lectured were nowhere during the few minutes the spectacle lasted and the play was played. If anyone had thought of the business of the evening Susie would not have suffered the thought to pass into action. She had her own part to perform, and she was convinced of its merit and popularity. She glanced round at the maps and diagrams, gave them the customary sweet praise—a little fainter than usual—and perpetrated a few smart jokes, which shone with a lustre not the

less damaging that it was borrowed, at the expense of the solid motive of the meeting. She spoke to one or two of the lads without further abashing them by waiting for an answer. She pitied them with an expressive little shrug for having to come out in the evening in the dry pursuit of knowledge after the fatigue of the day. She asked if they would not like games better, but when told by her sister that there were the materials for such games as draughts, backgammon, dominoes, in the adjoining room on other evenings in the week, paid no attention to the information. Susie contented herself with wondering why the committee (there was no committee) did not get up concerts instead of playing at keeping school ? The latter suggestion was in the face of Mrs. Crabtree's knowledge that Jane Prior was not musical and that Miss Gray could not be expected to play and sing through a programme —even if she had the assistance provided by the performance of 'that divine sonata of

Beethoven's you know, dear,' or 'that enchanting morsel of Schubert's,' which the critic would volunteer to supply. On the other hand, such of the boys as had musical capacities were being trained into a choir elsewhere, while to supplement the training here would be to relinquish in a great measure the purpose of the gathering, with Mr. Haynes's plans on behalf of this portion of his parishioners. But Susie cared for none of these things.

Mrs. Crabtree's last idea was to recall the fact that the Cowpath Races—the rowdiest races far and near—the existence of which every master with a scrap even of utilitarian conscience, regretted for his men, would be held in the course of a fortnight. She mentioned these races, and supposed, with an arch nod, the lads would all be there.

No, none of them was to get up on her account, Susie said, as she moved to go—a prohibition which had the effect of causing all the youths, including the incensed authority

on the circulation of the blood, to stumble to their feet. Well, if they would do it, she would take just one of them. She fixed on the worst lad there, who was also an imposing-looking, swarthy young giant, to see her out and open the carriage door for her.

The selected escort blushed up and grinned in triumph, while his companions glared at him enviously.

‘She is not to come here again,’ Jane, who was much disturbed, vowed to her coadjutor. ‘Do you see how she has unsettled the class? It is horrid to say it of one’s sister—I suppose she cannot help it—but Susie’s manner to all men—great and small, old and young, has always something of flirtation in it. I hate it,’ muttered honest Jane, ‘it makes me feel so ashamed.’

If Jane had followed Mrs. Crabtree to the door she would have seen her encounter Mr. Haynes, and work upon the exemplary, but slightly grumpy, elderly clergyman with her

blandishments. She dropped her bewildered collier escort with a gracious nod, and appealed to Mr. Haynes for his convoy. She kept him standing bareheaded, with his pepper-and-salt hair blowing in the cold spring wind, for five minutes, though she had prefaced her conversation with the dutiful announcement that she could not keep her husband waiting, and it was that wifely consideration which opened another husband's heart. She wreathed her charming face in smiles. She paid her companion pretty humble compliments on his good offices in general, and this class-room for the pit boys in particular. As her father's daughter, she begged to offer Mr. Haynes the small return of her heartfelt thanks.

And Mr. Haynes was deeply touched by Mrs. Crabtree's condescension and sympathy in paying this flying visit, and doing so much mischief within its flight. He had barely thanked Jane Prior and Bennet Gray for their

punctual appearance two nights a-week, and for all their labour and pains. He had made them feel, for their good, no doubt, that the help they gave was no more than their duty. He had groaned audibly, and shown himself sternly disinclined to let Jane off from her task, when the cold in her head, which still disfigured her even when it was going off, was at its worst, and Mrs. Prior positively forbade her daughter to expose herself to the evening air. He had not concealed the fact that single women by no means ranked with married women in his estimation. Neither had he hidden his impression that the former made too much of their trifling ailments. Before the culprits claimed indulgence on such pleas the maidens ought to be matrons accountable to husbands for the complainants' health and well-being. Then the case was entirely altered. For if a clergywomān, for instance, was out of health or was doing too much for her own peace of mind, it interfered seriously with the

comfort of her lord and master, besides harrowing his conjugal feelings.

Mrs. Crabtree was not the only visitor at the Kershaw class-room, though visitors as a rule were prohibited.

Mr. Haynes vindicated his right to break through the rules which he himself had laid down, by bringing in with him one evening, just as the work was over, a big man in the prime of life, whom Miss Gray guessed, by what she had heard, and by the first words said, to be Mr. Crabtree, of Haybridge, Lambert Crabtree's elder brother.

Mat Crabtree was a curious commentary on the assertion that all our vices are only virtues which have run riot and grown corrupted. The hereditary traits which he shared in common with Lambert, were marked, and it would have been difficult not to recognise the two men as brothers, but while Bennet Gray detested the one with only a civil veil thrown over the detestation, she felt as if without any prompt-

ing, she could like the other. He was all that Lambert pretended to be, and was all that he might have been if rank tares had not grown up and choked the wheat of his better nature.

Mat Crabtree was the elder born—the squire ; while the banker who had succeeded to the more profitable inheritance, and made the most of it, and was, to all appearance, the richer man, could only be squirish in his tendencies, and ape the country gentlemen whose bearing and surroundings were the objects of his ambition. It was quite lately that he had tacked Ladslove to his name in reference to the transaction by which he had secured the small farm to the bank, and managed afterwards to change it into a private possession.

Lambert Crabtree's bulk and floridness, which were coarse and would soon be gross, unwieldy, and rubicund, in Mat Crabtree would never be anything more than the becoming, slight portliness and rosiness, for his

constitution and years, of a temperate man who would keep himself in training up to old age by the hard exercise which he loved. Where Lambert was bragging and bullying in his bluffness, Mat was only frank and cordial. Mat, too, was fond of field sports, but his fondness for hunting and shooting, like his fondness for farming, had been qualified and dignified by the reputation for scholarship which he had brought with him from the university, and still retained, not without reason, after more than twenty years' retirement at Haybridge. Mat was also given to rallying his neighbours—above all, Jane Prior. He had known her from her childhood, and especially from the time of his brother's marriage. She had continued a standing wonder to him, which he had contemplated with a mixture of admiration and amusement. But Mat's rallying attitude was by no means the sole attitude of his mind towards any human being; it was that of a man of good sense and good feeling who

respects his neighbour as he respects himself. The railillery was seldom ill-timed, and, though it provoked Jane, and was apt to cause her to treat the offender with lofty disdain, the provocation was rather due to the lack of humour in the woman, which in itself tickled Mat Crabtree, than to any real ground of complaint on her part. For he was with most people the well-liked man who could, almost without trying it, influence his fellows, which Lambert sought to be, only partially succeeding in the attempt.

There was one thing in which Lambert Crabtree had the advantage over Mat, if it could be called an advantage. The younger brother, at the age of forty-three, put in claims to a jaunty perennial form of youthfulness, which the elder at forty-five had long left behind him. Lambert was a gay, scarcely sobered down Benedict, after eight years' experience of the character. Mat only two years older, hale and active in his prime, was reckoned

by himself and by others who took him at his own reckoning as a confirmed rustic student and bachelor, fairly buried among his fields and books.

The marriage of Lambert Crabtree to Susie Prior had forged a strong link between Mat Crabtree and the Priors in spite of various obstacles. In the first place, Lambert was by no means a popular son and brother-in-law. In the second, the brothers did not see much of each other, and, notwithstanding the caricatured likeness between them, had grown to differ more widely than they agreed. In the third, Haybridge was farther from Redcot than Newton was, and there had not been the apology of actual relationship for compelling intercourse between the families, which Susie and her children supplied.

Still, by dint of natural affinity, Mat Crabtree had been in the habit till lately of coming more frequently and familiarly to the Priors than his brother had ever done, save during

the short period of his courtship. But since Bennet Gray's stay at Redcot, Mr. Crabtree of Haybridge had been so keenly alive to the barrier erected by Lambert Crabtree's behaviour with regard to the minerals on Ladslove, that he had refrained from intruding under John Prior's roof. As time wore on, however, and Lambert continued foiled, Mat became glad of an excuse to overleap the barrier. He had been on his way with an errand to Redcot, when, having occasion to call at Kershaw Rectory in passing, he was told by Mr. Haynes that Miss Prior and the young lady who was governess to the little Woods were at that moment in the collier lads' class-room.

‘Why, what are they doing there?’ the visitor asked. ‘Let us have a look,’ was the next idea. ‘It will save me the trouble of going on to Redcot if Miss Prior will take my message.’

Then the two gentlemen presented themselves in time to see the ladies preparing to

start. Had Mr. Haynes and his companion come earlier, no doubt Jane would have limited her recognition of their presence to a grave salutation, and would have gone on steadily, though it might be a little stiffly, with what she was saying, calling on Miss Gray to follow suit. And Bennet might have complied after a struggle, for she held herself as under orders; but though she ought to have been the more hardened of the two to the ordeal, she was glad to be spared it.

‘It is bad enough to go off the lines to the boys,’ she thought, doing her thinking, as will be readily observed, in a scandalously slangy manner, ‘but it would have been terrible to have had my “Outlines of Animal Physiology” gauged by a stranger who may be an inspector of schools, though I believe he is Mr. Crabtree, of Haybridge, a university man and a scholar, which is not much better.’

So Miss Gray listened with pleasure to the

clatter of the heavy boots of the pupils as they dismissed themselves.

In the meantime Mat Crabtree was shaking hands with Jane Prior, and telling her pleasantly, 'I am glad to see you so well employed, Jane, giving what you have received.' At that moment a twinkle came into his clear blue eyes —nearer the sky in colour than the steel tint of Jane's eyes allowed hers to be. 'What is it you are imparting to the young colliers?' he inquired. 'You are not boldly cutting to the bone at once, and introducing their inquiring spirits into the very heart of mysteries? It is not Hegel?'

'No,' said Jane, 'but I'll not tell you. I know you think I am as incapable of comprehending the simplest system of philosophy as the most ignorant lad among them.'

'I never said so, and the gratuitous remark is the more unkind, since I was just going to ask you why you sent back the last parcel of books without naming any more you

wanted, so that I did not know whether it ought to be Berkeley, or Spinoza, or Spencer.'

'Thanks,' said Jane, a little mollified ; 'I'll write when I wish more ; but, in the meantime, I am trying to master a little political economy. Of course, I went through Adam Smith and Bentham before, and now I am busy with Ricardo and Mill.'

'I wish you joy ; indeed I do. Why should you doubt me? You like close reasoning, and if it is sometimes in a circle, and proves nothing save to the man's own satisfaction, I suppose it must be so, since man does not live by reasoning alone. Are you going to take Carlyle and Ruskin by way of antidote?'

'Not just now,' said Jane, treating the speech literally, and answering with reserve ; 'I have a purpose in view. I am not reading for mere amusement.'

'I should think not, though you are capable of it,' declared Mat Crabtree, with a marvelling diverted laugh. 'But I say, Jane, will you save

your father and mother from being bothered with my company so late? Besides, I ought to be at home looking over some accounts—my domestic against your political economy. I was coming over to tell you that Susie and the children are to spend Thursday at Haybridge. You know they were prevented from driving over at Christmas because Molly had a cold, and there was a suspicious case of illness at the offices which might have turned out measles. But all that is set to rights; and there are a few crocuses in the garden and lambs in the meadow by this time. Will the whole of you, or any of you, do me the favour of joining us, and making the day less tiresome for Susie? I think I can promise you that my housekeeper's resources will be equal to the occasion—at least, that you will not be starved though you may have to put up with a little roughness in a bachelor's quarters.'

‘ You do not need to offer a pledge for the hospitality of Haybridge,’ said Jane, as to a

man who was wasting idly modest professions. 'You are very kind, but I cannot speak for my father and mother, or even for myself, in accepting your invitation till I see them.'

Mat Crabtree was ready to grant this. 'But you will mention the matter and send me word. To tell the truth,' he admitted, 'I do not depend upon Mr. and Mrs. Prior. It is not worth their while, especially at this season. But I thought you might come and meet your sister and bring over the little Woods to have a game with their cousins. By the way,' in an undertone, 'is not that their governess, the young lady who has come to stay with you at Redcot since I saw you last? Will you introduce me? I shall be delighted if you will bring her also.'

'You can tell her so yourself,' said Jane, turning round and moving a couple of yards towards Bennet.

'Mr. Crabtree, of Haybridge, wishes to be introduced to you, Miss Gray.'

Bennet Gray smiled and bowed, and stood unconscious and untroubled, waiting for something to be said by Mr. Crabtree, as the next step in making her acquaintance.

‘I’m glad to meet you, Miss Gray,’ said Mat Crabtree naturally and cordially; then he lifted his eyebrows with a slight involuntary motion, and looked a little—just a little—confused. He was short-sighted, and could not always trust the evidence of his eyes, but on the other hand he was observant and quick in recalling faces, which he seldom forgot.

Mat Crabtree had a habit which was also his brother’s, and which Lambert traded upon—of speaking out what came into his mind. As Mat blinked for a second and looked again at Bennet, he said, with some abruptness, ‘Have I not had the pleasure of seeing you before, Miss Gray—once, indeed, more than once, though we were not introduced, down in Berkshire?’

At the very first words of the question, Bennet gave a startled glance back at the questioner, and the tell-tale blood flew in vivid crimson over her face; then, as she turned away her eyes, the blood ebbed, and she grew very pale in marked contrast to her usually bright colour. ‘The pleasure was not mutual,’ she said, with some hesitation; ‘I never saw you before, either in Berkshire or anywhere else.’

‘No?’ he exclaimed, in the next thing to blunt incredulity. ‘But you have been in Berkshire? You are the Berkshire Miss Gray? Your face and figure are not so common—pardon me—as to mislead anybody. I almost think I could stake my life that you are the young lady who was pointed out to me in the cricket field at Barleigh, whom I afterwards saw at church sitting opposite me during the service; though I never spoke to her,’ he protested smiling. He was thrown off his guard by the puzzle of the situation. He

was rendered blind to the embarrassment he was causing by the excitement of a man who is not accustomed to be found wrong on one point, who is spurred on to vindicate to himself the correctness of his powers of observation.

‘If Miss Gray’s is not a common face, Gray is a common name,’ interposed Jane, drawn out of herself by noticing the vexation increasing to distress on her friend’s part, occasioned by Mat Crabtree’s odd insistence. Jane did not in the least understand it. As a rule she was careless of such *contretemps* in society. But when her attention was arrested, as in the present case, her *esprit de corps* and her friendship were alike up in arms. What earthly right had one person to dispute another’s identity? What conceivable excuse could a man urge for questioning and contradicting a woman on a point which she must know best? It was too unreasonable and absurd. She had thought Mat Crabtree

had sense and taste, that he was not like his brother except in externals. She was disappointed in him. She would not have Miss Gray put out—though it was hard to say why she should be put out by such utter nonsense.

‘Yes,’ Bennet was saying in rather a low tone, exhibiting to the full the awkwardness which a person naturally straightforward is apt to betray when he or she is driven into a corner, and is about to be guilty of an equivocation. She had failed to reply to the appeal as to whether she had not been in Berkshire, and the rest of her reply was thoroughly ambiguous. ‘There may be many Miss Grays even in Berkshire.’

‘Well, I cannot make it out,’ asserted Mr. Crabtree, in reference to a matter which he had no business to make out, which, if he had not been an honourable, unsuspicious gentleman in the middle of his husbandry and philosophy, he might have dropped as if it had been a

serpent or a live coal, on the first hint. ‘Then you were not the niece to Josh Gray, of Chancery Lane?’

‘I had no uncle Josh Gray,’ said Bennet, as stiffly and laconically as if her tongue was frozen.

‘I am sorry to hear it,’ declared the incorrigible inquisitor. ‘It would have been a very good thing for you if you had. That Miss Gray, Josh Gray’s niece, must have come into——’

He was stopped by Bennet Gray’s calling as if in an extremity of apprehension—‘Oh, Mr. Haynes, *will* you kindly shut the door? The draught is dreadful.’

‘I hope *you* have not caught cold next, Miss Gray,’ said Mr. Haynes with a shade of irritability in his voice as he turned from a book kept to show the average attendance of the class, which he had been carefully examining. He hated to hear people cough, especially when they were his curates or teachers or Bible

women. It was a sign of impending trouble, and it always sounded like a reproach to himself. Mrs. Crabtree might have coughed as much as she chose; she was accountable to none save her husband. But the rector's subordinates were answerable to him, while he, in his turn, was answerable for them. 'Young ladies are so careless about draughts, and wraps, and ordinary precautions against illness,' he said aloud, quite plaintively.

' You should not condemn us wholesale, Mr. Haynes,' Jane felt bound to remonstrate, holding up a fur cape of her own, and a shawl of Miss Gray's. ' You see these, and you hear Miss Gray is guarding herself against a draught. We must go home presently, when Mr. Crabtree has finished his investigation into Miss Gray's pedigree and history,' Jane said ironically, dealing what ought to have been a withering rebuke to the offender, and by no means intending to deal another blow at her friend.

' I am afraid I have been very rude,' said

Mat Crabtree, laughing as at an excellent joke, with the coolness of innocence not impudence. 'But the likeness is amazing, if there is no foundation for it,' he returned to the charge. He was incapable of taking advantage of Miss Gray's age, sex, and social standing, as Lambert would have done without scruple. He, Mat Crabtree, was not influenced by the accident, that he happened to be Crabtree of Haybridge who was conferring an honour in speaking in a friendly fashion to a stranger—a young woman, the governess to John Prior's grandchildren. The speaker did not consider himself a man who might take liberties and commit *bêtises* in such circumstances with impunity. But he was tempted to over-estimate the privileges of his forty-five years when he had to do with Jane Prior and her friends and contemporaries—young women—state it in a general way, young enough to be his daughters.

'I think there must be some degree of relationship,' Mat Crabtree hammered on at his

speculation, with the amazing amount of obtuseness which clever, kindly people sometimes display. ‘Pray, are you a Londoner, Miss Gray? Can you tell me where your family hailed from originally? Were they north or south country Grays? Like most old fogies, I am a dabbler in genealogies.’

Bennet Gray stood at bay.

‘Then I daresay you will hardly be able to believe me, Mr. Crabtree,’ she said a little haughtily, but with the ring of truth in her voice, ‘when I own that I cannot tell you much. My father was an attorney in London—though he had not a brother called Josh,’ she allowed herself to digress, with a faint smile, a falter of her tongue, and a rising blush; ‘so I am a Londoner born, but both my father and mother died young, and I was brought up by my mother’s relations, who were not Grays, but Shrubsoles.’

‘Now, that is a Berkshire name,’ cried Mat Crabtree, with the utmost alertness, ‘I am not

sure that there are not Shrubsoles at Coldblow, near Barleigh.'

' You are wrong there, Mr. Crabtree.' She was goaded into the impulsive contradiction. Then she stopped short. How should she know that he was wrong? She had not so much as admitted that she had ever been in Berkshire or at Barleigh. It was all a miserable tissue of prevarication and self-contradiction. What could this Mr. Crabtree think of her? He was making himself, without any evil intention, probably, a thousand times more detestable than his brother. He would work her a world more harm ; while she had been thinking that she would like him, and they might become friends. How did it strike Jane and Mr. Haynes? Bennet dared not look up at them, or seek to know. Was exposure to come in this way—the worst way possible—and quite prematurely, when everything had been going on so favourably?

There was no more of the discussion. It was broken off, without any solution of the

riddle, by Jane's leading the way out to the phaeton. Mat Crabtree would not be hindered from wrapping up the girls and handing them to their seats, by the trifling objection that he was in bad odour with both of the women. He said his good-byes cheerfully, and with what sounded a positively malicious heaping up of insult on injury. He called after them, 'I hope to see you both at Haybridge on Thursday, when we shall have plenty of time to follow the ramifications of the Grays, and to settle the connection between Miss Gray, here, and the other—the Berkshire Miss Gray. Depend upon it, there is something in it.'

'I never knew Mr. Crabtree so provoking and tiresome before,' Jane apologised and complained in one discontented breath, as the couple drove off. 'What could possess him that he should torment you about Berkshire and this other Miss Gray whom he seems to have got on his brain? Did you ever happen to be in Berkshire?'

‘Yes,’ Miss Gray was forced to answer faintly; then she added more steadily, ‘but certainly I did not see Mr. Crabtree there.’

‘Then, what does it all mean?’ inquired Jane in her bewilderment.

‘I don’t know,’ answered a weary, heartsick voice. ‘I have got such a headache, will you excuse me, Miss Prior?’

Rather than have passed through the ordeal to which she had been subjected, Bennet Gray would have preferred a thousand times to have encountered, in her capacity of teacher, every school inspector in England, and to have been detected by each putting all the towns of her native land into wrong counties, and making the blood which was coursing in her veins stand as still as water in a stagnant pool.

CHAPTER XIII.

AN APPEAL TO A MAN'S HONOUR.

JANE PRIOR was as unsuspicious as Mat Crabtree was fit to be. Like all busy women whose lives are not engrossed by the merest trifles of social intercourse, she had not time for prying, or even for collecting evidence with regard to humanity and sifting it for her mental satisfaction. This lack of leisure, with a certain constitutional abstraction of mind, impaired her power of sympathy, but it rendered her in another sense easy to live with, and gave her the appearance of larger toleration than she actually possessed. But there are incidents which rouse the most unwary and the most charitable. Something is said or done by the

member of a circle totally different from what might have been expected, unaccountable, except in one light. It points so plainly—however reluctant those who run may be to read the sign—to a course of deception and to a secret probably not too creditable to the person it concerns, that the disturbed witnesses would be more than blind dolts if they refused to believe the evidence of their senses and their reason.

Miss Gray had looked and spoken—or rather had not spoken—so strangely, had been so unlike an open, upright woman who has nothing to conceal, and had grown so agitated under Mr. Crabtree's *mal-apropos* cross-questioning in the Kershaw class-room, that a distinctly uncomfortable impression had been made on those present. The exception had been Mr. Haynes, who had not been attending part of the time, whose mind, long accustomed to run in one meritorious groove, seldom ranged beyond sermon-writing and parish work, and

who had coined a word for the benefit of young ladies, that word being ‘vagarious.’

But already Mat Crabtree, who had been full of his own idea, and noticed little at the moment, on thinking the matter over in his house at Haybridge, was taking himself severely to task, and telling himself he had been an inquisitive, inconsiderate old idiot, who had put his foot into it, and made a fine mess. Something was out of joint, though he could not pretend to say what. He did not believe he had been mistaken in his recognition of Miss Gray. The fine face was not only remarkable for its bloom of womanly beauty, there were too many points of resemblance to make error probable. Why she should be the governess at Redcot under a cloud, as it appeared, he could not conjecture. Nobody might be much to blame, or the wrong-doer might be sorry for the past and striving to retrieve it. And there had he gone, like an intolerable meddler and hunter after game, prowling and scenting and

raising a timid persecuted creature for ought that he knew. The mischief he had done might be irreparable and far-reaching. Serve him right for his stupid folly—a man of his age! And his prey was worthy of him—a girl, an orphan by her own account, no older than Jane Prior—a girl out in the world, though it might be by her own choice or fault and not of necessity, making her way for herself, and so practically defenceless—a girl seemingly full of gifts and attractions, while he had contrived to affront and disgrace her.

At Redcot Jane Prior was struggling ineffectually to put the whole scene out of her mind. She was the more perplexed and worried because she was so unaccustomed to the process—the doubt in the first place, the effort to shake off the doubt in the second. She was furious with herself for thinking anything could be wrong where Miss Gray was in question. Of course, she might have often gone to Berkshire if she thought fit to do so, and Mr.

Crabtree might or might not have seen her there, and might have elected to call her 'The Berkshire Miss Gray,' though she was, in point of fact, a Londoner. Or he might, as was more likely, be entirely wrong, confusing her with some namesake of hers, whom he fancied she resembled, of whom and of whose relatives she knew nothing. What did it matter? Who need care? Yet Miss Gray, for some occult reason known only to herself, had cared, and cared very much. Jane could not deny it to herself. What of that again? Some people were so much more sensitive than others. Miss Gray had not looked like one of these thin-skinned folk, but most of us have—say one vulnerable spot in our armour. Miss Gray might have poor relations in Berkshire, or she might be so unfortunate as to own kindred who were worse than poor—disreputable. Jane believed stoutly that if she had poor relations or disreputable kindred she would own the one and disown the other with the stern intrepidity

of a Brutus, still she could forgive Miss Gray if her pride was more foolish, or her self-respect less vigorous.

But do as Jane would—candid, confiding soul as she was—with all her panoply of philosophy and learning, she could not get rid of the conviction that there had been something personal at the root of Miss Gray's distress—that her trouble, if she had a trouble, was an individual affair. In opposition to Jane's lofty principles, and strong prepossessions—in spite of her reverence for knowledge in any shape, and the common cause she was disposed to make with every woman intellectually engaged—against Jane's very will, she began to look on Miss Gray with other eyes, to see her in a different light, to watch and make a record of all the small particulars of her behaviour, and give them a new meaning. Jane hated herself, but she could not help what she was doing.

The first thing which struck Jane Prior was that Miss Gray did not wish to go with

the children to Haybridge, as it had been arranged they should go. Miss Gray had not hitherto shown any disinclination to encounter visitors or pay visits. For Jane had been wonderfully wide-awake on one social point. She had taken pains to show the public how she regarded Miss Gray, and how she desired it to regard her ; and as Mrs. Prior was of the same mind as her daughter in the matter, the public had responded civilly, as it generally will in such a case. Miss Gray had paid occasional visits with Jane, and more rarely with Mrs. Prior. Miss Gray had helped the family to receive visitors at home, and she had been treated by others as the Priors treated her —as it would have been an offence to them, if, when so doing, their neighbours had done otherwise—like any other young lady, not a governess, living at Redcot. The exception had been with the Lambert Crabtree's. Free and easy as his manner was, caressing and bland as hers never failed to be, with her pro-

fuse general invitations, her ready offers of things which were not wanted, and her 'dear Miss Gray's,' husband and wife, in their quite different lines, were neither of them by any means free from the vulgar vice of affability. And in their very carelessness the couple always indicated a line of demarcation, and showed that to them, though they might hail her familiarly or propose to pet her, as their varying humours moved them, Miss Gray was, after all, the governess at Redcot, no more and no less.

Miss Gray had grown up under the new light cast on those who rear the future women of England, but it might be that she had not always found the light set on a candlestick and not hid in a bushel, or else there was something in her relations to the Priors which stirred her to grateful affection. She had till now welcomed the occasional visiting in the happy, cordial spirit with which any other perfectly natural, well-balanced young woman more than

content to work will keenly relish a little play. She had displayed the same lively interest in the Redcot neighbours, the same intuitive perception of their characters and histories that she had evinced with regard to the place itself and its surroundings. This sympathetic identification of herself with the Priors in reference to their home and their friends had been one of Bennet Gray's crowning graces, especially in the eyes of Mrs. Prior, who, though retiring in her habits, was very friendly in her nature. But the identification broke down inexplicably when the invitation to Haybridge came on the *tapis*.

It was clear to any observer whose eyes were opened that Miss Gray's instant instinct was to shrink from going to Mr. Crabtree's, and that she was ready to urge any plea which might obviate the necessity. In ordinary circumstances an excuse on the ground of health would have been too glaringly preposterous. Bennet Gray, in spite of her studies, was like

the most illiterate of hunting, shooting, fishing, racing, flirting-in-the-open-air, flirting-in-the-ballroom, dancing-till-break-of-day women. She was, like Miss Austen's 'Emma,' or a milkmaid, 'the picture of health.' Bennet Gray was a glowing, rosy, loving-exercise, laughing-at-fatigue girl. An apology which would have been usually so broad a contradiction must have struck herself in that light, and shamed her ingenuity in this direction. Yet she had been so unlike herself, ill at ease and nervous since that encounter in the Kershaw class-room, that she might even have posed as an invalid without imposing too great a strain on the credulity of her audience.

But Bennet had not the courage, though she stuck to as piteously transparent *ruses*. She would be one too many in the phaeton—her presence must incommod Miss Prior. The little Woods would be happier away from her—Miss Gray—for a day. At least if they had grown so accustomed to her that her being

there had ceased to be a restraint, their cousins, the small Crabtrees, would wish for her absence. Her company could not fail to be an intrusion when Mr. Crabtree had particularly invited Miss Prior to meet her sister, and the party was to be a family party. Mrs. Prior would be lonely left all day by herself, when Mr. Prior had so many engagements. At last the ominously numerous excuses resolved themselves into the desperate assertion that she—Bennet Gray—had nothing suitable to wear.

There was only one response. Jane maintained inflexibly that she would not be incommoded; on the contrary, there was plenty of room for Miss Gray in the phaeton. Tom or Sam could go on the box with the driver, the child would like nothing better, and the two other children could sit together perfectly well on the back seat. She would like Miss Gray's company, of course, if she did not object to go on any other account—and here, to Jane's dismay, her own voice took a

perceptibly distant, aggrieved tone before she knew or could help it. She hastened to add that she would be glad of Miss Gray to help her with the children. She had nothing to say to Mrs. Crabtree which all the world might not hear. Mr. Crabtree's invitation to Miss Gray was sufficient proof that the party was not limited to near relatives or family connections.

The children cried clamorously that Miss Gray must go and see Mr. Crabtree's lambs and calves. Haybridge was far better than the Bank House, and they liked Mr. Crabtree ever so much more than they liked Uncle Lambert. Mr. Crabtree never plagued them, or if he did he made up for it by showing them things which they liked to see, and letting them do what they pleased, so long as the little boys were not rough to their sister, or did not quarrel, or trouble Aunt Jane. Aunt Susie would be there, and though she did not take much notice of them, when she did it was to

praise them, to forbid their being contradicted, and to give them all the good things on the table. Aunt Susie was so pretty, and had such beautiful clothes, that Ally constantly got ideas for Anna Maria Constance's wardrobe from her aunt's toilet. Molly and Piers liked Mr. Crabtree and Haybridge also, and were not half so wild and given to wanting everything their own way as when they were at home.

Chubby Sam went so far as to say Haybridge would not be worth while without Miss Gray; and perhaps he and she might go in search of peacocks' feathers instead of turkeys' feathers, like Tom's, for Mr. Crabtree kept peacocks. Or the couple might be so fortunate as to find the thrashing-mill going, for Mr. Crabtree's mill did not stand always like their old thing, then he and she might stand and watch the corn running through.

If Miss Gray did not yield to these allurements, the obstacle was not to be found in Mrs. Prior. She held to it with smiling

determination that nothing warranted her in keeping Miss Gray from making acquaintance with Haybridge. Mrs. Prior was partial enough to think that Miss Gray would not like it so well as Redcot. Still, almost every country place had its advantages ; Haybridge was not without them ; while Mr. Crabtree was a kind host as well as an excellent man. She herself had often enjoyed going over there, and her familiarity with the spot would render her the better able to appreciate what she hoped Miss Gray would tell her of first impressions. In the interval she would do very well with the quilt she had in hand, her book, and Tommy. ‘Oh, fie ! Tommy, to yawn at the prospect.’ In fact, Tommy did more than yawn as an appropriate commentary on his mistress’s speech, and a symbol of the drowsy day in store for him, he proceeded to transform himself into an inverted curtainless four-post bed—lying on his broad back, with all his thick legs in the air. The performance

caused great gratification to the children, who were alternately Tommy's delight and his torment.

Then Mrs. Prior went out of her way, as it sounded to Bennet, to range herself on the side of the enemy, and gratuitously give an opinion which would have been agreeable to hear at any other time. Miss Gray need not trouble about dress ; she always looked nice. That serge she was wearing would do capitally, if she did not grudge it, for sauntering about the fields and garden, being pulled about by the children, and sharing their dinner and high tea.

It was within a day of Thursday's visit that Bennet's last defence was thus placidly bowled over. And it was on the Wednesday afternoon that Jane Prior, going into the schoolroom, found Miss Gray so busy writing a letter that she was standing in her bonnet and jacket at the desk with her pen flying over the page. In the meantime Tom and Sam were

building houses with a pile of lesson books, and Ally was dressing a reluctant kitten in some of Anna Maria Constance's cast-off finery.

'I am afraid you are too late with your letter, Miss Gray,' said Jane, on the impulse of the moment, 'the post-bag left ten minutes ago.'

'Thanks for telling me,' answered Bennet, not looking up, and hastily scribbling her signature, 'but I mean to walk across to the post-office, and the children are coming with me. Run away, Ally, with Tom and Sam to Nursie, and get your hats and coats, or I shall not be able to wait for you.'

There was a little post-office at a toll-bar about a mile from Redcot, but the Priors' letters rarely went there; they were sent direct to Newton. The walk to the post-office was not a favourite one. It was along a rough by-road full of miry ruts in early spring, within thin straggling hedgerows, dividing poor fields that had not been long brought in

from a corner of Kershaw Moor. The landscape would present a dreary outlook under the watery sinking sun, which conveyed little or no warmth so late in the afternoon. The celandines and daisies which had been budding and bursting open in the morning would be either closed tightly again, or presenting a frost-bitten, pinched look to the approaching raw chill of the evening.

Miss Gray was allowing herself scanty time to reach Cross-Trees Post-Office and get back with the children before dusk. Hardly a moment after the thought had crossed Jane's mind, she saw from the staircase window, which she was passing in order to go up to her room, Bennet Gray and the children going down the avenue, posting as for a wager, or on an errand of life and death, to traverse the unattractive road to and from Cross-Trees.

Jane Prior was not a martinet—a finicking intermeddler with those under her supervision.

But she could not help asking herself where was the need of this hurry to the post-office at an ungenial hour by an unattractive road? Why could Miss Gray not send her letters, like other people, in the post-bag, which would carry them, without trouble on her part, to Newton? If her letter was not written in time, what important correspondence had she in which the delay of a single post was of vital consequence?

Jane told herself she had no business to ask this even of herself; it was no concern of hers. It was mean of her to speculate in this manner.

Still the knowledge remained that Jane was aware Miss Gray had no near relations. No doubt many women in her position seek to indemnify themselves for the absence of close domestic ties by a kind of artificial circle of complaisant acquaintances, with whom the solitary woman is ready to correspond on any or no pretext, deluding herself into the belief

that she has as many friends as other women possess. But Miss Gray was not one of these women of many facile, spurious friendships, always in a state of active effervescence on paper. She had not found time in the course of her busy life to do more than make a few strong, lasting friendships. These were mostly among young women like herself, earning an honest, honourable independence, as Mat Crabtree had put it, making their way in the world. Or else the correspondents were the parents and guardians of these young women, who took a cordial, reflected interest in her. To them she was content, as she had told Jane, to write at the rate of once a month, or once in the three months, according to the degrees of intimacy.

Jane fought against such idle, unworthy suspicions, which had been making her unhappy of late; when in an inconceivably short time, as it seemed, little Alice Wood tapped at her aunt's room door to tell her the walking party

were back. They had come in to grandmamma's afternoon tea.

‘Have you run the whole way, Ally?’ Jane was driven to inquire.

‘No, Aunt Jane, we only walked very fast not to be benighted. Miss Gray carried Sam over the rough bits. It was rather fun to make such haste. But Sam was very naughty. I don’t know that he quite deserves to go to Haybridge to-morrow,’ announced the little girl, who was disposed to be a strict disciplinarian to her younger brothers. ‘Do you know what he did? He had asked Miss Gray to let him put his hands into her muff, and when we were near the post-office he pulled out her letter and ran away with it, to put it into the slit, though it takes me to get up to the slit, Aunt Jane. Miss Gray was very angry, and frightened for her letter. I am sure if she had caught him she would have boxed his ears. But she started so quickly after him that she slipped in the mud. She might have broken her leg, you

know, but she only dirtied her dress ; and Sam let fall the letter, so it was in the dirt, and all in a mess too. The woman at the post-office came out of her house and picked up the letter before Miss Gray could reach it. And the woman said to Sam, “ Little master, you never oughtn’t to play such tricks with letters.” So she looked at the outside of this one to see if the postman could read what was on it, after she had wiped off the dirt. Then she said it was all right, only no thanks to Sam ; and she asked him what Mr. Crabtree, of Haybridge, would have done to him if he had not got his letter ? I think Miss Gray had been writing to Mr. Crabtree to say we are all coming to-morrow—don’t you ?—though she did not tell me or ask if we had any message. Now, was it not naughty of Sam, Aunt Jane ? ”

‘ Yes, Ally ; but you are naughty too to tell tales on Sam, and chatter so much,’ cried Jane. ‘ Go away and ask Miss Gray to pour out tea for granny. I am not coming down.’

Jane could not face Miss Gray at once. She could not digest what she had heard in a moment. She must think it over, though the matter had come to her ears in an irregular manner, and as it was not bound to do, thanks to Ally.

Miss Gray writing to Mr. Crabtree ! What could cause her to do such a thing ? The child might be somehow mistaken, or the old woman might have misread the address. But that was unlikely, and if it had been so, surely Miss Gray, knowing that little pitchers have ears, would have corrected the mistake, and Ally, so ready with her tongue, would have repeated the correction, along with what had gone before it. No ; there is such a thing as taking probabilities into account, and a logical mind can hardly avoid doing so.

Miss Gray had not written to Mr. Crabtree to say that though she had done her best not to accept his invitation she was to be at Haybridge with the others after all. Miss Gray,

according to her own statement, had only seen Mr. Crabtree once in her life, and even if he was right and they had met before in Berkshire, they had not been introduced or spoken to each other—of that Jane was absolutely certain, she could never doubt Mat Crabtree's perfect honesty. Did Miss Gray write to him before their next encounter to ask his forbearance—to beg him to refrain from the embarrassing discussion of north-country and south-country Grays, and from investigating further as he had seemed bent on doing the extraordinary case of resemblance which had come to light? Was her letter an appeal to his honour to preserve silence on such of her antecedents as she did not choose to make public? Strange as it sounded it looked alarmingly like it. Again, if this were so, why did Miss Gray select Mr. Crabtree for her confidant? Would it not have been franker, more womanly, more worthy of her in every way, if she had trusted her—Jane—who had been so willing to receive Miss Gray

as a friend, and either told her all there was to tell, or else bidden Jane have faith in her friend? Jane knew in that case she would not have failed in faith, however it might have been tried; and then Miss Gray might have commissioned Jane to bespeak Mr. Crabtree's consideration and good feeling to refer no more to what had impressed him; which he was not to mention.

Jane Prior felt wounded in the sisterly regard she had prized so highly. She was miserably uncomfortable in her straightforward character, with regard to the amount of secrecy and stratagem which she was forced to admit had come unexpectedly under her eyes. She could not help an undefined apprehension of some unheard-of painful result, when this mystery and manœuvring, so hateful and sickening to Jane, were in their cause and effect more completely exposed.

CHAPTER XIV.

FALSE LIGHTS.

MISS GRAY, in her unconsciousness of any fresh betrayal through the children's chatter, seemed so relieved by what she had done that Jane was tempted to doubt all that had gone before it, and think she had been the victim of her imagination.

The spring day was one of those exceptionally fine ones of which the English climate can sometimes boast. The party started, to all appearance, in excellent spirits, and the drive was not long enough to weary the children.

Haybridge was a large, square, comparatively modern white house, which, with its superabundance of green railings and palisadings,

its chain of ponds, that included a hand-bridge and a boathouse like an old-fashioned summer-house, might almost have been modelled on a Flemish or a German country house. The best that could be said for the house was that it looked roomy, comfortable, and cheerful. It stood in a small park with the by no means extensive ground prettily broken. Other gains consisted of a hill, which rose behind the house, and was for a large part of the year dotted with Mr. Crabtree's sheep. There were also meadows which stretched in front down to a trout stream stealing along beneath a fringe of osiers. These meadows formed, in summer, pasture-ground for Mr. Crabtree's cattle. They were acknowledged to be the finest, far and near, and as they browsed they helped rather than hindered the general repose of the scene.

Mr. Crabtree awaited his guests at one of the green gates. He was a tall, broad figure, easy and authoritative-looking as he stood there in his rough tweeds, with his air of mature

mastership of all about him, and his handsome, vigorous face equally mature and somewhat masterful too, lit up with good-humoured hospitality. The whole man was in entire keeping with his surroundings. He lifted out the children and exchanged words with them. He shook hands with the young ladies, and thanked them heartily for their company. ‘This is very good of you, Jane ; I am much obliged to you for coming and making it livelier for Susie.’

His next sentence was addressed to Miss Gray. Did it contain any *double entendre* ?

‘That is right of you, Miss Gray, to come and see what Haybridge is like.’ He praised her lightly. ‘We must try and make the place show itself in its best colours to a strange lady, mustn’t we, Sam ? But we hope she will be better acquainted with it and us, so we must not let any objectionable nonsense slip out.’

Was there more meant than met the ear ? Jane could not tell. Mr. Crabtree spoke in a half-jesting tone, but he did not laugh. His gaiety

was not without the grave kindness and marked respect which she could imagine him man and gentleman enough to show to a woman whom he was called upon to re-assure, whose fears he sought to lay to rest. But, when it came to that, Mat Crabtree was tolerably sure to be studiously considerate in his very friendliness to any woman whom a large proportion of the world would judge socially his inferior, because of her lack of the world's goods and her independence in working for her bread.

Withal there was something contradictory in Mat Crabtree's look and manner. Jane fancied she caught amidst the serious courtesy and interest of his voice and face, a twinkle of the blue eyes, as if they said in spite of him, 'I recognise the comicality of the situation.'

Miss Gray blushed vividly, and it might be she hung her head a little. But Bennet Gray had a trick of blushing, and the hanging her head, if she did hang it, was so slight and mo-

mentary that the inclination could not be counted on any more than the blush. Indeed, Jane was not certain that there was not a fleeting response, a twinkle in the hazel eyes, in accordance with the twinkle in the blue, as Bennet looked up the next instant. She appeared happy and at her ease afterwards, allowing the children to drag her here and there, and point out some of the wonderful things which were to be seen at Haybridge.

Susie and her babies, as she persisted in calling them, though the little boy and girl were as old as Tom and Sam Wood, had arrived beforehand. Susie was already presiding in her brother-in-law's house, graciously ordering and patronising everybody and everything to a greater extent, perhaps, than Mat Crabtree altogether approved. Lambert Crabtree had not come with his wife, an omission which nobody, not even Susie, pretended to regret. Whatever his presence might be on other festival occasions, it was certainly not desirable at a

family party where women and children predominated.

There was an immense deal to do, and a limited time to do it in. There was first luncheon—brown soup and chicken pie, and the junket for which Haybridge was famous, with special dainties of cakes and fruit for the children. It was served in the big square dining-room, containing pictures of the master of the house's father and mother, and of himself and his brother when they were round-faced, round-eyed boys like Tom and Sam. That room seemed to have been made for twelve people dining in it all the year round; but Mat Crabtree, as he presided over the luncheon, did not look as if he would ever sing small or feel forlorn when he was eating his meals there alone.'

The children resumed their hats and coats, for the visitors had to be taken up to the hill to see the lambs, away to the offices to inspect the calves, over to the ponds to count the goslings

and ducklings, with a detour to the poultry-yard to find the earliest turkeys' eggs to carry home to granny. The round implied an amount of fatigue, which was trying for little legs, though Mr. Crabtree carried one and sometimes a couple of the Redcot or the Newton children on his shoulders the most of the way. At last the children were installed in the half empty, disused drawing-room, where there was nothing to spoil. It was understood that little people can only rest by romping in another form, as horses can only rest standing, so bricks, marbles, and balls, a cat and her kittens were thoughtfully provided for the guests. Miss Gray offered to stay and be play-mistress, and Susie, amidst profuse thanks, managed to convey softly that the part was one side of Bennet's calling for life. ' You are so fond of children, dear Miss Gray, and they are so fond of you, that you ought never to be separated. I quite envy your delightful way with the babies.'

The real state of the case was that Susie troubled herself very little with the two big, red, light-eyed, boisterous bantlings that were so like their father. She seldom contradicted them, for she craved their homage, as she did that of every living creature. But when they would have been in her way as might have happened often, particularly since they were not ornamental, she sent them from her without a pang. She sweetly entrusted them to their nurse, or to Susie's French maid, or to any other constrained or complacent person who would take the children off their mother's hands. There was not much harm in the poor little things as yet, only they were not engageling. Mat Crabtree's heart occasionally ached for them, he could hardly have told why. He now enacted that they could play with their Redcot cousins, and even if there did come a collision, his housekeeper, who was somewhat of a personage—elderly, stately, but not ungenial—was prepared to settle all disputes, and

if the disputants were good, and got on her right side, she might even tell them a story when they were tired. Mr. Crabtree would not, on any account, permit the sacrifice of Miss Gray to her duties, against which Jane Prior also protested.

‘Children are all very well,’ he said peremptorily, ‘but their elders are glad to get rid of them sometimes ; eh, Jane ? We are all out having holiday for the day, ain’t we ?’ he asserted cheerfully, ‘and one of us shall not be allowed to steal a march upon the others, and slip her neck back into the sober yoke to which our shoulders have grown accustomed, while the rest toil at disporting themselves in a heavy, ungainly fashion—all save my sister Susie here, to whom play seems to come natural.’

‘Don’t flatter, Mat,’ protested Susie, languidly, taking his exception as a compliment.

Miss Gray was at liberty, and she repaired with the remainder of the grown-up people to the garden. There was not much to be seen,

and Susie employed herself more with the blossoming peach trees and their promise of fruit—in view of the peaches, the principal share of which was likely to find its way to the Bank House, than with the small share of ordinary spring flowers which occupied the others.

The garden of Haybridge was, like the house, chiefly remarkable for answering the end proposed. It had been sensibly laid out, was productive even at this season, and left a wholesome impression on the minds of the visitors that nothing was neglected or forgotten. From the sea-kail to the rhubarb, everything was looked to properly. The newly-dug, smoothly-raked beds, the young plants in the frames, the very heaps of leaves and bundles of sticks were there in a state of hopeful preparation. There was only one small hot-house, because Mr. Crabtree did not want many grapes, and cared more for open-air native flowers than for the exotics of a conservatory. But here,

too, the hyacinths and jonquils, heaths and azaleas did credit both to Mr. Crabtree and his gardener.

In the borders outside the amber-yellow aconite was sharing its reign with the golden and purple crocuses, which had been mentioned as one of the inducements to the visit to Haybridge, and with masses of blue, white, and pink hepaticas, and tufts of brown and pink garden heather.

The straw-coloured primroses and their milk-white sisters were waiting for the next moon before they were rife. The anemones and polyanthus only presented their aggressive green sheaths. The wall-flowers held up their heads, but displayed no more than the iron-brown edges of the petals well shrouded in the slaty calyxes. The commonest crimson, lilac, and chocolate auricula merely existed in the shape of tiny-crumpled balls like collections of small green clenched fists powdered with flour.

The most liberal plant was Sweet Alison, which amicably spread out a few hundreds of broad flat miniature white faces in prominent patches. It represented those groups of common-place, easily-pleased smiling people that diversify the more sombre ranks of society. These hardy, homely people, not chary of their favours, are little thought of except to be despised, but they bring untold relief to what without them would be the sensitive and oppressive nature of human intercourse.

It was in the garden that the party fell into pairs—Mrs. Crabtree walking with her sister, and Mr. Crabtree accompanying Miss Gray, whom he invited to turn down a side walk in order to look at a singularly situated last year's nest. Susie could not object to be left with Jane for a few minutes, though the young matron was wont to appropriate as her right any man in the company, and was quite honest in expressing her preference for male society. She took advantage of her present deprivation

to link her arm in Jane's, looking a fragile little creature beside her tall sister, and to deliver her mind of a warning. 'My dear Janie,' said Susie, in her most caressing way, 'there is no doubt Miss Gray is a most charming person. Even if I thought otherwise, which would be difficult, I should hesitate to say so to you, since you have elected her to be your particular friend. But does it never strike you that she forgets—just the least little bit?'

'What?' demanded Jane, bluntly, ready to boil over with wrath, and stopping short in their walk.

'Well, my love, in the first place, come along. I am sure,' spoken most politically, 'you do not choose that everybody should observe we are at high words—at least you are. I mean the accident of her position. No one has more sympathy than I have with girls in her sad circumstances.'

'There is really no call for your sympathy. I don't know anything sad in Miss Gray's cir-

cumstances.' Jane boiled over at once. 'I wish I had been as well grounded in my education and could feel myself as thoroughly equipped to be of some use in the world, and to secure my own independence. Suppose my father were not able to keep up Redcot any longer, and I saw it to be my duty to relieve him from the burden of supporting me—now that I am a grown woman! Suppose I not only felt such a course of conduct to be my duty, but was able to put it in practice, and could turn my education and whatever abilities I have to good account, do you intend to say you or anybody else would be justified in regarding my circumstances as sad?'

'I don't know about the justification,' said Mrs. Susie, shaking her lovely little head; 'but I'm afraid we'd do it, justified or not. It is the verdict of the world, and, my dear child, there must be something in that.'

'As if there had never been such a thing as stupid errors and cruel prejudices, taking whole

centuries to clear away,' protested Jane. ' But the world is getting wiser.'

' It is quite wise enough for me,' said Susie, coolly. ' Now, don't lose your temper, it is not worth while. Besides, did I not begin by saying Miss Gray is a charming person, quite handsome in her own style, ladylike, and all that which makes her the more dangerous? Yes, that is the right word, though you are so dreadfully touchy that I am almost frightened to use it. For girls in her position—you may hold what extravagant notions you like about it, you dear, high-flown, learned goose! the sharp-sighted world judges differently—have a double motive for breaking away from their disadvantages and establishing themselves creditably.'

Jane was silent for an instant at what appeared to her the sheer insult of the words.

' Do you mean me to think, Susie,' and she gave a gasp to recover her composure, ' it would be the opinion of you and people like

you, if that happened to which I have referred, if my father, who is poor, as you must know perfectly, were to get poorer, and I were to become a schoolmistress, I should all at once grow a dangerous person, eager to relinquish my calling, and driven to scheme and plot for a husband? I shall be very glad to have mistaken your meaning, but if that is not what you are thinking, I cannot imagine what you intend to convey.'

'Oh, good heavens, Jane, don't let your madness reach that pass; don't suggest that you may become a "school ma'am,"' cried Susie, in half genuine, half mock horror.

'Why not?' cried Jane, recovering her self-command. 'I at least should be contented with my lot, and should not strive to better it. To be a "school ma'am," as you think fit to call it, strikes me as a more honest and honourable shift than to marry a man I could neither love nor respect, simply that he might furnish me with gowns and bonnets.' Jane was sorry the

moment she had said the bitter words. She was sensitive on the point of her sister's marriage, and she could not comprehend that Susie might have no sensitiveness for herself.

Mrs. Crabtree turned aside the implication very neatly. 'You forget there is another alternative, that a woman may love and respect a man who can give her gowns and bonnets. The two conditions do not necessarily clash. Indeed,' she went on with an airy laugh, 'I am not sure that the last ought not to imply the first. You would not have us wives ungrateful, would you? I know I am much obliged to Lamb,' with a pretty little assumption of languishing humility, 'for "swotting," as he says, in that bank of his, in order that the babies and I may be what you think disgustingly smart. But we have lost sight of one consideration,' and she posed her little figure more daintily as she spoke. 'Even though you were to demean yourself—excuse me, dear, for using the language of rational people—and lose your social

standing by going out as a governess and earning your living, you would still be, in this neighbourhood at least, one of the Priors of Redcot.'

'And if Miss Gray's father had been a beggar it would have been no fault of hers,' insisted Jane. 'As it is, he was one of the partners in a respectable firm of attorneys in London,' she ended a little faintly. Her mind had been unsettled lately with regard to Miss Gray's antecedents, though the deceased attorney had not been one of the disturbing elements.

'There are attorneys and attorneys,' said Susie, with a wave of her little hand, very much as Jane herself had said 'There are Grays and Grays,' 'and London is a wide word; but though you may twit Lamb and me with keeping a bank at Newton, the best attorney in London who could not leave his daughter a penny, by the way, is hardly a match for the heads of old county families like the Crabtrees and Priors.' She looked pointedly as she spoke

at Mat Crabtree appearing in the opposite walk, talking and laughing with Miss Gray. ‘Mind my words, Jane, whether you like them or not—I am sure I do not often say things that people do not like ; I hate to set people against me’—this was uttered quite plaintively—‘but I cannot bear to see you so wilfully blind without doing what I can to put you on your guard.’

Jane opened her lips to say, ‘You may spare yourself the trouble. I do not want your warning, Susie, any more than I prize your example;’ but she shut her mouth in time to keep in the caustic retort, and Mrs. Crabtree remained mistress of the field. She resumed, ‘I repeat, that such a handsome, well-mannered girl as Miss Gray is a dangerous person to have for a governess, without any blame to her. I daresay if I were in her shoes I should do the same. I do not pretend to be superhumanly disinterested and virtuous. It would have been a most injudicious step to

have brought her to Redcot and kept her there, if Jack had been at home. Surely mam-ma and pa-pa's eyes would have been opened to such a gross piece of imprudence. But, I declare, you are all as innocent as babes ; I feel quite like a Mephistopheles beside you. Even as it is,' Susie waxed confidential while she nodded her head with Mandarin or Burleigh-like sagacity and grasped the two sides of her sable cape in the most impressive manner, 'I confess I am not quite comfortable to-day. I am not at all certain that Mat Crabtree has not taken a fancy to her. There are no fools like old ones.'

Jane stood still again, fairly aghast this time, and not without warrant. To bring such an accusation against Mr. Crabtree in his own garden, well nigh in his presence, and to clinch it by doing the next thing to calling him an old fool ! Truly Susie, with an eel-like smoothness and pliancy, did not know what reverence meant.

‘Come along,’ enjoined Mrs. Crabtree once more, almost in an annoyed tone this time. ‘Don’t you see they are looking at us? Forgive me for being rude,’ she continued, as she rapidly recovered her good humour, ‘but I must call you a young fool, Janie, whom one might buy at one end of a town and sell at the other. It is not that I have not your interest at heart. Quite the contrary. Who should if I have not?’ broke off Susie, lifting up her lustrous dark eyes, and opening them wide with an expression of almost pious sisterly affection. ‘I was always inclined to believe that Mat had a sneaking kindness for you, and I should never have stood in the way or turned him against it, though it might have cost my boy his place.’

‘Susie, how dare you say such things?’ groaned poor Jane, fit to sink into the earth. ‘Are you not ashamed to speak in this way? Mr. Crabtree is old enough to be my father. He has done nothing but laugh at me and argue with me ever since I can recollect.’

‘Oh, my dear, these fatherly feelings when a man has just turned forty-five, are most delusive, and not to be depended on,’ pronounced Susie, as from the depths of a profound experience. ‘As for the laughter, I often tell Lamb the Crabtrees are all laughing hyenas; and, with regard to the arguing, why, with some people it is the height of agreeing,’ declared Susie, with another emphatic nod. ‘Such would-be fathers and mentors are almost as dangerous as charming persons like Miss Gray. I say, Jane,’ Susie burst out afresh with bird-like inquisitiveness and cunning, ‘I cannot fathom the quickness with which she and Mat Crabtree have struck up an intimacy, only begun, I believe, at the Kershaw collier lads’ club-room the evening I was there last week. Ah! that, too, is not wise—a sort of levelling of class distinctions in amateur teaching and learning. That dear old gaby Mr. Haynes should be well shaken for devising such an institution. No, I never saw my worthy

brother-in-law so easily won or so readily accessible before. That absurd, deceptive fatherly air, on which you say you have counted, has this gain, that it makes him, in spite of his *bonhomie*, rather formal and slow in getting along with girls, unless, as in your case, he happens to have known them all their lives.'

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.







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